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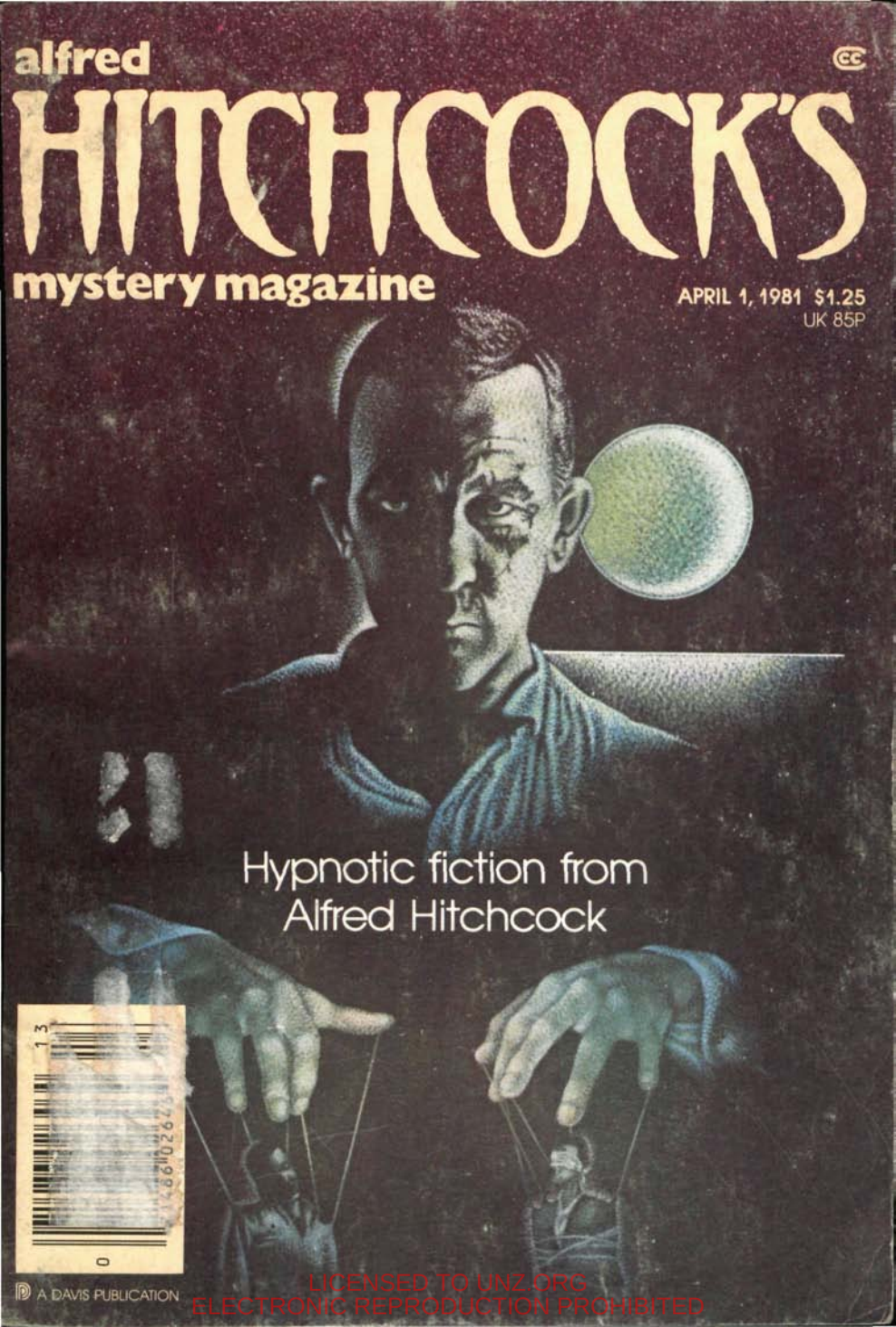

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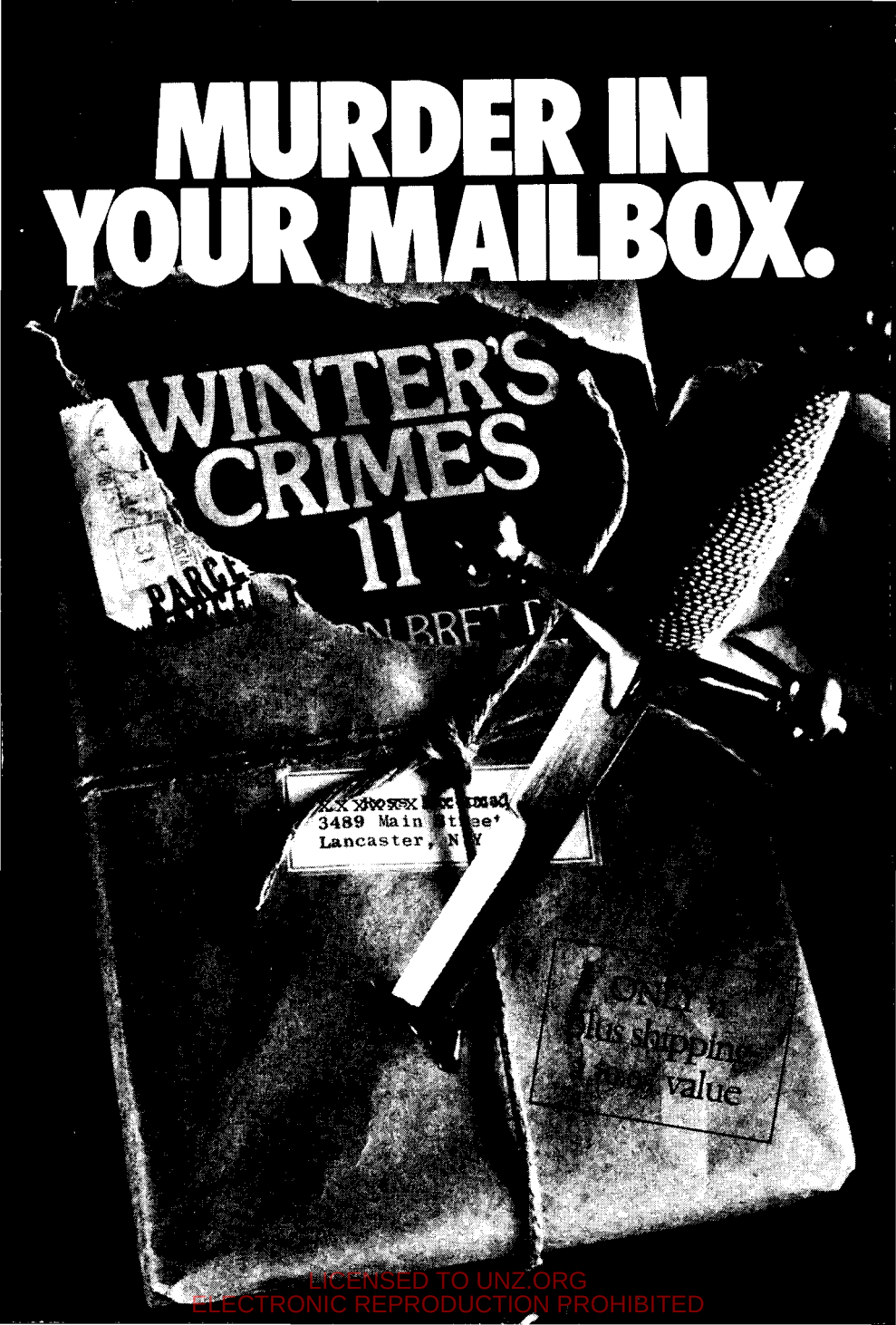

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April 1, 1981

Dear Reader:

One prerequisite to premeditated crime is the getaway—and one important factor in getting away, which you non-criminals may never have considered, is mobility. The criminals and evildoers in this month's issue have no problem with this, considering the abundance of motor vehicles available to them.

Sam Train finds it suspicious that a retired cop can afford to pay cash for a Porsche in Ernest Savage's "Worse Than a Fallen Angel." A Fiat and a Jaguar play key roles in "Changing Places" by Jeffry Scott. A young man delivers a Porsche to his boss's daughter in "A Way with a Will" by Talmage Powell, and then finds out what really happened to his uncle in a camper many years before. Two kidnappers escape with their victim in a battered old camper in "Lost Causes" by A. E. Schraff, and two con men take a bus ride through the mountains in Kenn Davis' "Dead Ringer."

We hope you'll enjoy these and all the other stories in this month's issue, whether you're at home or on the road.

Good reading.

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VOLUME 26, NO. 4 APRIL 1, 1981

alfred HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE APRIL 2

SHORT STORIES

THE MISSING COLLECTORMANIAC *by William Bankier* 5

A BURNING ISSUE *by Susan Dunlap* 21

THE PERPETUAL STUDENT *by Gary Alexander* 26

A WAY WITH A WILL *by Talmage Powell* 40

ONE DOWN *by Carroll Mayers* 50

CHANGING PLACES *by Jeffry Scott* 57

THE TIP OFFS *by John H. Dirckx* 71

LOST CAUSES *by A. E. Schraff* 80

DEAD RINGER *by Kenn Davis* 93

WORSE THAN A FALLEN ANGEL *by Ernest Savage* 101

MOVIES AND TELEVISION

CRIME ON SCREEN *by Peter Christian* 119

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Achilles Healey expected to have his wife back by the time the curtain fell . . .

THE MISSING COLLECTORMANIAC

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Professor Harry Lawson followed his wife up the narrow stairway to the third floor. He was a lucky man; after all these years, Lola was still a spectacular woman to follow upstairs. "Have you got your key?" he asked her.

"The light is on. Al must be there."

Lola opened the door and Lawson followed her into the office. There was room in it for two chairs, a desk, and a filing cabinet. As for people,

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any number could enter, providing it was not more than three and they liked each other.

"Morning, Al," Lawson said. "Have you heard from Healey? Did his wife show up?" The Professor was just back from Montreal where he had been tracing a missing hockey player. He and Lola had caught a plane in response to an SOS from the former carnival strongman, Achilles Healey, whose wife, Midge, had vanished.

"I spoke to him on the phone this morning," Al said, vacating the boss's swivel chair. "She's still absent without leave."

"How does he sound?" Lola asked apprehensively. She knew a troubled Healey wandering loose in London could be as damaging as the Blitz.

"He sounded like Vesuvius with a crater full of fresh lava." Al cleared his throat and glanced upwards. "Well, how do you like it?"

Lawson looked at the ceiling. Having his wife's brother around gave him two things to contend with. One was the fact that Al's last name was Batross. The other was Al's weird inventions, gimmicks that satisfied his craving for originality. The Professor found himself staring at an elephant's foot projecting from the ceiling. "There's a pachyderm on the roof," he said, knowing it wasn't true but suspecting he would never be given another chance to make the statement.

"It's an old umbrella stand. Don't worry, it's bolted securely. I painted the cracks on the plaster to make it look as if it just came through." Al took a beer mug from the desk, reached for a concealed spigot, and drew a pint of beer from the elephant's toe. "There's a keg inside," he explained.

Lawson could not conceal his admiration. "You are paying homage to one of the geniuses of American television comedy—the late Ernie Kovacs."

"Who was he?"

"He was before your time. But he used to draw beer from the damndest things. Lola, why don't you telephone Achilles and we'll get this show on the road."

The road led to an auditorium in Battersea on the south side of the Thames. Achilles said on the phone that he preferred to be met there—the flat was a mess with Midge not around. He sounded more angry than lonely.

During the taxi ride, Lawson remembered the years in the carnival when he was an illusionist, Lola was his assistant on stage, and Achilles Healey used to juggle oil drums. Full ones. Then, during a tour of Scot-

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land, their unscrupulous manager had absconded with the receipts, leaving the troupe unpaid in Paisley. Lawson had followed the thief, caught him in London, and shaken enough cash out of him to finance a new career as a tracer of lost persons.

The retirement was well timed. Lola was complaining she had become too fat to appear on stage in the skimpy costume the act required and her presence was the main reason people paid to watch Lawson perform. She *had* put on a pound or two but her husband enjoyed looking at her all the more. So did the men on the street who collided with lampposts as she walked by.

"We're here, love." Lola had her purse open; she liked paying taxi drivers.

Lawson helped her out of the car and they stood on the pavement facing an unusual building. It had a curved stucco front, broad concrete steps, and glass doors. A mini-marquee announced in letters painted with loving care that this was the home of the Battersea Variety Society. The top floor was crowned with a cupola, its windows fitted with frilly kitchen curtains that made a homey contrast against the leaden November sky.

As they approached, the doors swung open, held by a giant with black hair well oiled and parted in the middle. It dipped across his forehead, giving him the appearance of a water buffalo. He wore a tight blue suit made tighter by the crimson turtleneck under the jacket. "In here, Praw," Achilles Healey said. "Thanks for coming."

Lawson's nickname had been invented by a master of ceremonies when the carnival was on tour in the southern United States. At the climax of the act, he exhorted the audience with the words, "Let's hear it for the Praw . . . fessah!" Harry became Praw Lawson from that moment on.

They followed the strongman across a lobby, through an intimate theater with rows of ancient seats facing a stage, then past a padded door and into a business office decorated with dozens of framed photographs mounted on the walls.

"We'll wait here for Gladys Pontefract," Healey said. "She runs the Society. When she heard you were coming to look for Midge, she said she wanted to talk to you."

"Is Midge a member?" Lola asked.

"Has been ever since we moved here. We retired from the carnival because Midge was tired of travelling. She's a Londoner." He sighed. "I miss the old times. Lately I've had to take work moving pianos."

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"That's a tiring job."

"And lonely. Just me and those damned pianos."

Lawson imagined his former colleague humping an upright down a flight of stairs by himself. Laurel and Hardy had done it, but not with a real piano. "What happened with your wife?" he asked.

Healey shifted his feet. "I'm ashamed to tell you. It's wicked."

"We're all friends here."

"All right." The big man reached for it. "She's a collectormaniac."

"A what?"

"She steals things out of shops. That's what made me so mad at her."

Never in a lifetime would Lawson have hurt Healey's feelings by telling him the word was kleptomaniac. Besides, collectormaniac sounded more descriptive. "Why would Midge's taking things cause her to run away?"

"Because she stole from the Society's jumble sale." Healey told how the BVS conducted a sale where members contributed unwanted clothing or objects from the home to be offered at low prices from stalls in the lobby. "When I saw the stuff she'd stolen, I took her to the committee," he said. "I made her apologize and give it back."

Lola's eyes hardened. "You humiliated your wife in front of her friends?"

"I sure did," Healey said righteously. His strength was not in the area of understanding human feelings. "I tried to teach her a lesson. But she made matters worse. She ran away."

"And the head of the committee—is she the woman who's coming here?"

"Gladys Pontefract," Healey confirmed. "She believes she can help you find Midge."

"An entrance cue if ever I heard one," said a resonant voice from the doorway. Then a spectacular woman stepped forward and filled the frame. She wore a fluorescent yellow one-piece racing driver's suit made of sheer jersey and fastened by a broad zipper running from pelvis to collarbone. Her hair was the style favored by Nashville girl singers, baskets of curls dyed fire-engine red. She had a face to support this flamboyance—even features, flawless makeup on lips and eyelids, and an expression of supreme confidence.

After Healey performed the introductions, Mrs. Pontefract said, "You're looking for Midge Healey? More power to you, Professor Lawson. Last time I saw her, she was a troubled woman."

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"You mean when Achilles brought her to you with the stolen goods."

"She felt bad enough then but I've seen her more recently."

"You saw Midge?" Healey lunged forward, his thigh striking the corner of a massive desk. The desk moved a few inches. "When? Where? You never told me!"

"Because I knew you'd go off half cocked as you are about to do now. Relax."

"Let me handle this." Lawson smiled at the spectacular Pontefract. "I take it you have no objection to telling *me* where you saw Midge Healey?"

"None whatever. It was in Paddington Station. I'd just come back from a business trip in Oxford and as I walked out of the station, I saw Midge. She was in a queue waiting for the boat train."

"Boat train?" Healey slammed a fist into his palm. "You mean she's escaped?"

"I hope so," said Mrs. Pontefract.

"Which boat?" Lawson asked. "Did she name her destination?"

"She did not."

Lawson sensed the woman was on Midge's side against the husband. He would draw no useful assistance from her in this case. "I think that's all," he said.

His attention was on the framed photographs. He peered at them close up. "I only met your wife at the wedding, Achilles. It would help if I could see a recent picture. Is she in any of these?"

"She is indeed," Pontefract intervened. "That's Midge. And here she is—no makeup, no costume. She was helping backstage."

Lawson saw a short woman with a scrubbed complexion and neat, no-nonsense hair brushed back from a face clouded with uncertainty. Her expression said "I don't belong in this picture—I'm not sure I belong anywhere." Lawson remembered Midge from her wedding day. She had been breathless then, a little drunk, in disarray from dancing with and being kissed by a lot of strangers.

"And here I am," Gladys Pontefract said, "as Elizabeth the First. We had a difficult time making me look old."

"Who's your leading man?" Lawson asked, pointing at a tall youth with a dramatic lock of red hair across his forehead.

"He used to be our designer—Derek Wool. Derek always hogged a place in the cast photograph."

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Healey walked the Lawsons from the auditorium to the corner of the main road where they could hail a taxi. "How can I help, Praw?"

"Do you want Midge back?"

"You know it."

"Not just to punish her? You've already hurt her enough by humiliating her in front of her friends."

"I thought it would make her give up stealing."

"She can't help being a collectormaniac." A train rushed by in a cutting beyond the road. Lawson waited for silence. Then he said, "Tell me, where is *Mr*. Pontefract?"

"Gary? He lives somewhere up in London. Gary the Barrister. They've separated—Gladys has their kid with her at home."

"I got the feeling Mrs. Pontefract doesn't like you much."

"It's because of the revolving stage. I couldn't do it any more."

"Revolving stage?"

"The Society was doing a revue. The ladies sang 'Songs of All Nations' as the set revolved," Healey explained. "The stage has a turntable that used to run off a motor but it broke and they can't afford to get it fixed. So I turned it by myself."

There was a respectful silence.

"But it was like a mine shaft under that stage," he went on. "I felt trapped. It sounds crazy, but I ran out on the job. I had to."

A taxi pulled up in response to Lawson's signal. "Sit tight then, Achilles. It may take some magic, but I think I can get Midge back."

In the taxi, Lola turned from waving and said, "What magic?"

"In a manner of speaking. This is not your ordinary missing-person situation. No amnesia, no thief running with stolen funds, no foul play. The nub of the case is the relationship. There's a great misunderstanding between Midge and Achilles and if we can't clear it up, better they stay apart."

"But you think you can get her back."

"There is one clue. It may give me a starting point."

"If she's sailed somewhere, how can you even begin to look for her?"

"That's the clue. I don't think Midge Healey has sailed anywhere."

"But the woman said . . ."

"The woman told a lie. Clearly she thinks an American wouldn't know the difference. She underestimates this American. Coming through Paddington Station, she says, she saw Midge waiting for a boat train. Boat

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trains leave from Waterloo and Victoria. Paddington serves the west country."

"Why would she lie?"

"Because she doesn't like Healey. He let her down when he refused to go on turning the stage. And she resents the way he humiliated his wife."

"Then she's sending you on a wild-goose chase."

"Right. But Praw Lawson chases no geese, wild or domestic. Praw Lawson will pursue the lady in the yellow suit."

Back in the office, Lawson said to his brother-in-law, "Draw three beers from the elephant's foot. I am about to dazzle you with detection." He was rooting through his collection of city maps.

As Al served the beer, the atmosphere hummed with anticipation. "I hope we're not going back out into the cold," Lola said. There was a gas fire hissing away in the mock fireplace beside the desk. She drew her chair closer.

"For the moment it all happens here," her husband said. He had found the street map of Oxford. Unfolding it, he spread it on the desk. Then he dialed the Battersea Variety Society on the telephone. "Mrs. Pontefract?" he said. "It's Professor Harry Lawson. A couple of questions if you don't mind. One to do with the case, the other a personal matter."

"How intriguing," her voice twittered on the line.

"Case question first. When you saw Midge Healey in Paddington Station, could you tell me which day that was? Last Wednesday? Thank you, that lets me check ship departures. Now the personal question. My wife and I want to spend a day in Oxford. Could you recommend a hotel? Someplace quiet and romantic." Lawson listened, smiling. "You don't misread me at all, Mrs. Pontefract. The Randolph? I appreciate it."

"Are we going to Oxford?" Lola asked when the call was completed.

"Not so's you'd notice," Lawson said, checking hotel listings printed on the side of the street map. "Al, be a good boy and get Achilles Healey on the phone." As Al began dialing, the Professor found the Randolph on the map and drew a circle around the location with a red felt-tipped pen.

"Achilles?" Al Batross said into the telephone. "How are your tendencies? Never mind. Hang on, the Praw would have words with you."

Lawson took over. "What do you remember about a character named

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Derek Wool? The set designer. Never mind why, I'm playing a hunch. Yes? That's interesting." Lawson was writing on a pad. "And then where did he go? Mmmmm. You've been a big help, Mr. Healey." He put down the phone.

"Fill us in," Lola said. The fire was warming her bones. The beer tasted good.

"Derek Wool designed sets for the BVS for a year or so. His daytime job was as a guard at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Then about a year ago he left the Society. Achilles had a goodbye drink with him and learned something interesting."

"What did he learn?"

"That Derek Wool's father had died. That Derek had to go back home to be near his widowed Mum."

"So?"

"Home is a town called Oxford. And the job Derek lined up there is similar to the one he had here. He is a guard at the Ashmolean Museum." Lawson was winding up with the felt-tipped pen. "And where is the Ashmolean located? Exactly . . . here!" He drew another circle on the map almost touching the first one. "Directly across the road from the Randolph Hotel."

"I don't understand," Lola pleaded. "Where are *we?*"

"Halfway there," Lawson said. "Let's try for all the way." He called directory enquiries and was told the number of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Then he dialed the number. "Good evening," he said. "Yes, I know the museum is closed but I'm seeking some information. I'm a friend of one of your employees, Mr. Derek Wool. We just got in from Cleveland, Ohio, and I want to come up and see old Derek. I know he has an afternoon off and I'd like to arrive on that day." A few moments of silence. "Tuesday afternoon? Thank you—goodbye."

"I'm still puzzled," Lola confessed.

"One more call," Lawson said. He dialed. "Harry Lawson again, Mrs. Pontefract. I'd like to have a talk with you. Yes, about the case. Why don't you come up and see me sometime? Do you know Longacre Street? The Falling Arches Pub, near Covent Garden underground station? See you there in an hour."

She arrived on time. Lawson was sitting with Lola at his favorite table near the end of the bar. The after-work crowd had dutifully downed their

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pints and headed for the train. The evening regulars were still at home burning toast, scalding beans, and vulcanizing their fried eggs—it was teatime in England.

Like any stylish lady, Gladys Pontefract had changed her hair before coming in to London. No longer fire-engine red, it was now classic black. The fluorescent yellow suit was back on the rack too. This evening she wore a simple black dress, the skirt cutting mid-thigh above knee-high latex boots.

"Move the ashtray off the table," Lola muttered.

"Why?"

"I may crush her skull with it."

"Am I late?" Gladys asked. She brought a whiff of cinnamon scent to the table. Lawson drew back a chair for her and then escaped to the bar. When he came back with the drinks, Lola and Gladys were not talking. They were looking at each other, laser beams destroying nail polish, fusing clasps on jewelry, the smell of burning hair lacquer heavy on the air.

"If you'll excuse me," Lola said, "I'd better go upstairs and make sure the gas is turned off. We don't want an explosion."

"Point taken." Lawson saw his wife away from the table deciding, in the interests of marital survival, to make it a short meeting. "Mrs. Pontefract," he said, "tell me the truth about you and Derek Wool."

"Derek used to be our set designer," she said calmly. Then she waited.

"I need the rest of the truth."

"He's left the society," she added.

"And gone home to Oxford," Lawson contributed, "to work at the Ashmolean Museum. Which is situated across the street from the intimate, romantic Randolph Hotel. His regular afternoon off is Tuesday. And you have admitted coming back from Oxford on a Wednesday."

Now Gladys Pontefract came apart at the seams. Which is to say, she blinked a single, majestic blink. "How did you find out?"

"We have our little ways. The point is you and Derek Wool have been spending time together at the Randolph. Rehearsing *Romeo and Juliet*, I dare say. Or at the very least, Walter Pidgeon and Greer Garson."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because my friend's wife has disappeared. And you tried to snow me with the phony boat-train story. Which tells me she's in London and you know where she is."

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"What if I do? That unreliable oaf treated her badly. He deserves to lose her."

"Not permanently. He's been punished enough."

"Matter of opinion." Gladys Pontefract swallowed some gin and did a Queen Victoria thing with her mouth. "Why should I tell you where she is and let you make things worse?"

"Because if you don't, I might report your Derek Wool-gathering to your husband, Gary the Barrister. He may or may not want to take custody of your child on grounds that you are an unfit mother."

Gladys allowed herself an eighth of a smile. "Have you known me for one day or five years? Never mind, let's talk about Midge Healey."

An hour later, Lawson saw Gladys Pontefract into a taxi. They had covered a lot of ground, had become friendly. "How many harem-dancer costumes will you need, Harry?" she asked through the cab window.

"A dozen will serve the purpose, Gladys. Can the costume department handle it?"

"I'll get them cracking. The sooner the quicker, you said?"

"That's right. I'd like to go on stage and conjure up Midge Healey before Achilles gets too restless."

The taxi drove away and Lawson climbed the stairs to his office. "You look smug," Lola said. "What have you been up to with that overage, egotistical sexpot?"

"The case is ready to be solved. Will you get Achilles on the phone, please? Tell him to meet me tomorrow morning at the auditorium in Battersea."

As she dialed the number, Lola asked, "Will the Prom Queen of 1950 be attending the meeting?"

"Not where I intend to hold it," Lawson reassured her.

There was very little room under the stage of the Battersea Variety Society. Harry Lawson peered along the beam of his flashlight. He saw baskets of costumes lining one wall. Canvas flats resting on their sides lay against another. The ceiling waited to knock the head of anybody over five feet tall who tried to stand erect.

"Why down here, Praw?" Achilles Healey moaned. He was bent almost double behind the illusionist. "We could talk anywhere. I hate this place."

"Sit on the floor. I'll sit on this box. Let me put the light on you. You're sweating, Achilles. What's the problem?"

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"I told you I panic when I'm closed in. I don't know why it is. I just know I've got to get out."

"Right." Lawson put a hand on the big man's arm. "I won't keep you long, old friend. Can you hang on for a couple of minutes?"

"If you say I have to, Praw."

"What you're experiencing has a name. It's called claustrophobia—an irrational fear of being closed in. A lot of people suffer from it."

"You mean I'm sick?"

"Only in a sense. The point is, you can't help feeling this way. When it comes over you, you have to get out of that enclosed space. Even if it means leaving the BVS without a revolving stage."

"Gladys hates me for that."

"Not any more. I've been talking to Gladys—about all kinds of things." The flashlight flickered over Healey's face, illuminating tight lips and eyes filled with fear. "The important thing is Midge. I think I'm going to be able to bring her back."

"How?"

"It will require one of my greatest illusions, Achilles. But that isn't the problem."

"What is?"

"Your reaction to her. You've got to understand your wife, sympathize with her."

An expression of stubbornness altered the strongman's features. "It's hard to sympathize with her stealing things."

Lawson leaned closer and spoke softly. "Midge's collectormania is like your claustrophobia. She can't help it. A feeling comes over her, a kind of anxiety, and she has to take something. It's all the same. You have to run outside—she has to steal."

Healey shook his head.

"That can't be true."

"Would I lie to you?"

The giant was silent for a full minute. "Poor old girl," he said at last. "She feels as bad as I do."

"Hold onto that idea, Achilles. I'll have your wife back as soon as we can get the posters printed."

It was a fine poster, set up by a job printer according to the illusionist's instructions. In bold black letters on a bright-yellow background, it an-

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nounced that the world-famous Professor Harry Lawson would appear for one night only on stage at the Battersea Variety Society. His act would include the return of the lovely Lola Batross and would feature an illusion entitled "Harem Happening, or The Reappearance of the Missing Wife."

There was much excitement when Lawson's one-night stand was announced and rehearsals began. Everyone was aware of Midge Healey's disappearance—some had been present when Achilles brought her around and made her hand over the pathetic items she had taken from the jumble sale. Having been told the Professor would cause her to appear on stage, they wanted to see how it would be done.

A special group of ladies were doubly thrilled. They were the ones conscripted to take part in the Harem Happening. They loved their costumes, especially the exotic headpieces complete with veils.

On the night of the show, the auditorium was full. Everybody was on edge, and none more so than Achilles Healey, who expected to have his wife back by the time the curtain fell. Lola had gone on a crash diet and was looking dangerous enough in her red nylon bodystocking for Gladys Pontefract to retreat to the front of the house where she occupied herself selling programs. From there she came on the run to Lawson's dressing room just before the overture.

"You're a double-dealing sneak!" she told him.

"What have I done?"

"Invited my husband Gary to the show! He just came in. You knew Derek Wool would be with me tonight. You're trying to get me in trouble."

"I've never laid eyes on your husband. I've never met Derek Wool."

"If he starts litigation to take away my daughter, I'll fix you, Lawson. Derek and I love each other. We'd be married if Gary would only set me free."

"It'll be all right, Gladys. You have to believe in magic, in the happy ending. You believe in *me*, don't you?"

"You? You're not magic, you're nothing but a preposterous con."

"Thank you, my dear. I am sustained by your faith." Lawson, looking splendid in evening dress, took down a hanger on which was suspended one of the pink harem costumes. "If you'll excuse me," he said, "I must attend to a last-minute detail." He left the dressing room and began to climb the back stairway leading to the top of the building.

At precisely eight o'clock, the upright piano in the pit, manned by a

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tall young man with a lock of red hair tumbling across his forehead, began to play the overture. Five minutes later, the curtain rose and the show was on. Back on stage for the first time in years, the Professor pulled out all the stops. There was nothing like an audience to lengthen Harry Lawson's stride or to broaden the sweep of his arm as he directed attention away from the key moment in one of his illusions.

He did the old favorites—a drowning in a glass tank; sawing a torso in half; the body in the sectional boxes. Then he introduced his specialties—the head flies through the air; the body in flames; the molten bullet in the glass of wine.

The crowd loved every minute of it. But they were waiting for the pièce de résistance—they wanted to see if the American wizard could engineer the return of Achilles Healey's wife.

The finale began with Lawson rolling on stage a frame made of chrome tubing and hung with red curtains—a draped telephone booth on wheels. With the spotlight illuminating this device, he drew back the curtains to show the frame was empty.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "inside this construction it is my intention to restore a family. Before your incredulous eyes, I hope to bring husband and wife back together. Most of you know of whom I speak. The Healeys, Achilles and Midge, have been separated by circumstances. Tonight I intend to call upon the fabled magic of the Middle East to bring the lady back where she belongs."

Lawson moved to the apron of the stage. "Witness if you will," he said, "the Harem Happening. Maestro, whenever you are ready." Glancing at the pianist, he almost recognized a familiar face.

As the melody, "In a Persian Market," arose from the clattering strings of the Society upright, Lawson used four dramatic gestures to close the curtains on the chrome frame. While he did this, a line of ladies clad in identical costumes undulated on stage. The Harem Happening lasted less than a minute. The ladies grouped themselves in a loose formation around the curtained frame, performing sinuous movements with arms and ankles. Professor Lawson kept his distance, directing the ladies with imperious movements of his hands.

Then, as the piano player turned the page with only a slight interruption in the music, the ladies reformed their line and departed whence they had come. Alone on stage, the great illusionist strode to the frame and, with a decisive movement, whipped aside the front curtain.

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She stepped shyly out of the enclosure. There was no doubt, it was Midge Healey clad in a red robe of Grecian simplicity, floor-length, tied at the waist with a golden cord. The audience went wild as Lawson took her by the hand, then beckoned backstage, and, as a bewildered Achilles Healey moved from the wings, presented wife to husband in as touching a ceremony as anyone there had ever seen.

Gladys Pontefract served champagne in her office after the show. In contrast to her anxiety when the evening began, she seemed in a mood approaching euphoria.

"What happened to make you so happy?" Lawson asked her through the din of a dozen conversations.

"My husband told me out front a few minutes ago that I can have my divorce. Which means I can marry Derek."

"Congratulations. What made him change his mind?"

"He didn't say. Maybe it was the effect of the inspiring things you said about the Healeys."

"That's possible. My words have been known to work miracles." Lawson smiled modestly and finished his champagne. "Tell Mr. Wool I think he's a lucky man."

"Tell him yourself. He's been playing piano for you all night."

The red-haired young man stepped forward to accept Lawson's handshake. "I thought I recognized you," the Professor said. "You're the face in all these photographs."

"I come down from Oxford when Gladys needs a piano player," Wool said. "I'm impressed with what you did tonight, but won't it all be for nothing? Won't Mrs. Healey's kleptomania go on as before?"

"I've been talking with her about that." Lawson explained what he had learned—that Midge was the only child of a prosperous dental surgeon who worked long hours and was a club member, a socialite. Instead of personal attention, the parents gave Midge objects they brought home to her from stores. A couple of years ago, they moved to America where there was even more money to be made. Lawson's analysis was that Midge found temporary relief from depression by stealing. The items she took were the closest she could come to the parental love she never received.

"Even if you're right," Wool said, "what can she do?"

"I've advised her and Achilles to take a low-priced flight to America,

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a second honeymoon. Find Mum and Dad and talk it out. Say what she feels and shame the Devil."

"Will that help?"

"You never know. But I'm in favor of the big argument," Lawson said. "We all go silent at the end."

"Enough of this heavy stuff, Harry," Gladys said. "We're waiting to hear how you brought Midge back."

"Yeah," Achilles said. Midge was seated on his lap, still dressed in her harem costume. "How did you do it, Praw? Did she come up through a trap door in the stage?"

"Nothing as complicated as that. I'm waiting for Lola to come in before I explain. Has anybody seen my wife?"

Nobody had seen Mrs. Lawson and the impatience was mounting. "All right," he said, "I'll tell you. But you'll hate me when I do. There's no great trick to it. It's all a matter of simple arithmetic."

"Arithmetic?"

"Yes. If any of you had bothered to count, you would have seen twelve harem ladies moving onto the stage but only eleven going off."

A thoughtful silence. Then, "You mean . . . ?"

"Exactly. Midge has been staying in the little room at the top floor of the hall since she disappeared—courtesy of Mrs. Pontefract, who had it in for most men, especially Achilles Healey, but who feels better about us now."

"My husband is the sweetest man in the world," Gladys said. She was a little drunk. "Especially since he went away."

Through the laughter, Lawson went on to say, "Tonight I took a harem costume upstairs. Midge put it on, kept out of sight, then joined the line as they came on stage. While the ladies milled about the frame, Midge nipped inside. There she unhooked the rear curtain and put it over her shoulders, tying it at the waist with a gold cord she brought on with her. When the others left the stage, I opened the front curtain and—voila!"

"Let's hear it for the Praw . . . fessah!" Achilles called, leading the applause.

By midnight, when the champagne was running out and Lola had not yet appeared, Lawson was worried. Somebody made a joke about the great Professor having to search for a missing wife but nobody laughed. Gladys was about to dial 999 and have a policeman drop round when there was movement in the doorway and the lady in question appeared.

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"I hope there's something left to drink." she said. "I can use it."

"What happened?" Lawson asked when Lola was seated, glass in hand.

"I've been ten times around the borough in a Rolls-Royce driven by an admirer who says he will love me forever. It took me till now to get out of the car."

"Did he . . . ?" Lawson's face went hard and, seeing this, Achilles Healey got to his feet.

"Calm down," Lola said. "The man was all purity and chivalry. He wants to worship me from afar. I gave him my charm bracelet and he hung it on the rearview mirror. There's nothing to worry about—it was kind of flattering for an old girl like me."

Gladys did a dramatic turn in the center of the room, her face a study in revelation. "That rearview mirror," she said, "was there a pair of baby booties hanging from it?"

"Yes," Lola said. "How did you know?"

"How marvelous! You have been taken over by my soon-to-be former husband, Gary the Barrister!" Gladys produced a throaty laugh. "It explains why he set me free. He's found somebody he likes better."

Lawson's face was now crimson. "You mean your husband and my wife . . . ?"

"Yes. Get ready for a new career, Professor." Gladys gave Lawson a pat on the back. "Instead of finding missing persons, you're going to be kept busy making that pest disappear!"

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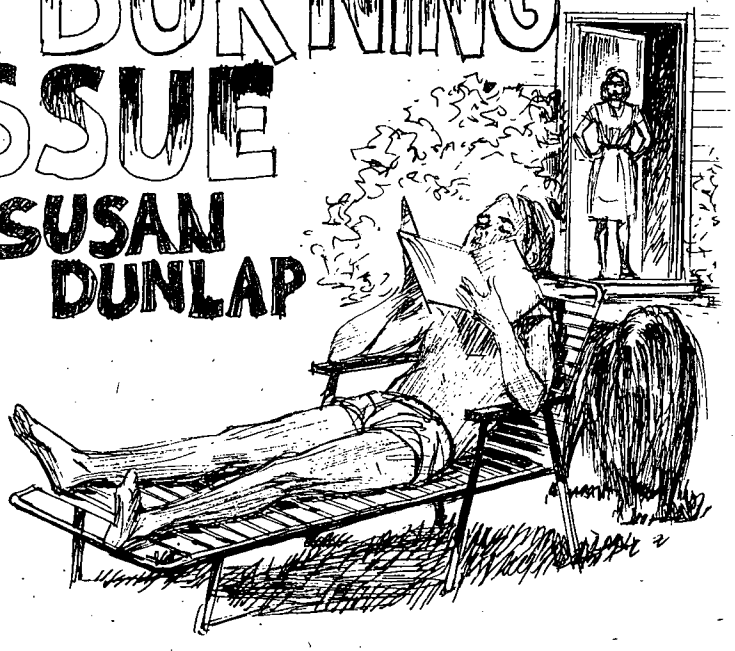
Andrew warned her she didn't prepare thoroughly . . .

A BURNING ISSUE

by SUSAN DUNLAP



I am not thorough.

I don't explore every minute detail, every aspect and angle of a subject. Only fanatics do that. But there is a basic amount of preparation required of any adult who seeks to live in relative comfort without being pummeled by recurrent blows of humiliation. And that preparation is what I fail to do.

It is not that I am unaware of this fault. *Au contraire*. Rarely does a

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day pass without it being thrust to my attention. There are the small annoyances: grocery lists I tell myself I needn't write down; recipes I skim only to discover, as my guest sits angrily getting looped in the living room, that the last words are "bake in 350° oven for ninety minutes."

There was the time when, as a surprise for Andrew, I painted the house. Anyone, I told myself, can paint a house. I did, after all, have two weeks, and it's not a mansion. This time I did not neglect the instructions on the paint can. I read them. What I did not do was consider if any preparation was necessary.

"Everybody knows you need to scrape off the old paint first," Andrew told me later. Everybody? I had the second coat halfway on before I realized the house looked like a mint-green moonscape. But all was not lost. The day I finished it poured. As Andrew observed, "You don't use water-base paint outside."

I could go on—but you get the picture. I've often puzzled as to what causes this failing of mine. Is it laziness? Not entirely. A short attention span? Perhaps. "You don't prepare thoroughly," Andrew has told me again and again. "Why can't you force yourself?"

I don't know. I start to read directions, plodding through word by word, letting each phrase sink into my mind, like a galaxy being swallowed by a black hole. But after two or three paragraphs I'm mouthing hollow words and thinking of Nepal, or field goals, or whatever. And I'm assuring myself that I already know enough so that this brief review will stimulate my memory and bring all the details within easy calling range.

In fairness to Andrew, he has accepted my failing. And well he should, since my decision to marry him was one of its more devastating examples.

I met him while planning a series of man-in-the-street interviews in Duluth. Easy, I thought. People love to hold forth on their opinions. (Not standing on a Duluth street corner in February, they don't.) Among the shivering, pasty males of Minnesota's northernmost major city, Andrew Greer beamed like a beacon of health. Lightly tanned, lightly muscled, with bright blue eyes that promised unending depths, he could discuss the Packers and Virginia Woolf; he could find a Japanese restaurant open at midnight; he could maneuver his Porsche through the toboggan run of Duluth streets at sixty miles an hour and then talk his way out of the ticket he deserved. And, most important, my failing, which had enraged so many others, amused him.

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And so six weeks later (what could I possibly discover in a year that I hadn't found out already?) I married him.

We spent a year in Duluth, bought a Belgian sheepdog to lie around the hearth and protect us. ("Belgian sheepdogs are always on the move," I read later as Smokey relentlessly paced the apartment.) I left the interviewing job and had a brief stint as an administrative assistant, and an even briefer one as a new-accounts person in a now defunct bank. In January Andrew came home aglow. He was being transferred to Atlanta.

I packed our furniture (which is now somewhere near Seattle, I imagine—there was some paragraph about labeling in the moving contract) and we headed south.

It was in Atlanta that I painted the house. And it was in Atlanta that I discovered what I had overlooked in Andrew. For all his interest in literature and sports and his acumen in business, he had one passion that I had ignored. The evidence had always been there; I should have seen it. Another person would have.

Above all else, Andrew loved sunbathing. Not going to the lake, not swimming, not water-skiing—sunbathing. He loved the activity (or lack of it) of sitting in the sun with an aluminum reflector beneath his chin.

Each day he rushed home at lunchtime for half an hour's exposure. He oiled his body with his own specifically created castor-oil blend, moved the reflector into place, and settled back—as Smokey paced from the living room to Andrew and back again.

The weekends were worse—he had all day. He lay there, not reading, not listening to music, begrudging conversation, as if moving his mouth to talk would blotch his tan.

I thought it would pass. I thought he would reach a desirable shade of brown and stop. I thought the threat of skin cancer would deter him. (Castor oil blocks the ultraviolet rays, he told me.) I coaxed, I nagged, I watched as the body that had once been the toast—no pun intended—of Duluth was repeatedly coated with castor oil and cooked till it resembled a rare steak left on the counter overnight. On the infrequent occasions he left the house before dark, people stared. But Andrew was oblivious.

Vainly, I tempted him with Braves tickets, symphony seats, the complete works of Virginia Woolf.

In March the days were lengthening. Andrew's firm moved him "out of the public eye." I suggested a psychiatrist, but the few Andrew called saw patients only during the daytime.

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By April his firm encouraged him to work at home. Delighted, he bent over his desk from sunset till midnight and stumbled exhausted into bed. By nine each morning he was in the sun. The only time he spoke to me was when it rained.

In desperation, I invited a psychiatrist to dinner for an informal go at Andrew. (That was the two-hour-late meal, and he was the looped guest I mentioned earlier.)

Finally I suggested divorce. But when I went to file, my lawyer insisted I read the Georgia statutes, this time carefully. It is *not* a community-property state—far from it. And, as Andrew pointed out, I was unlikely to be able to support myself.

So the only way left was to kill him. After all, it would matter little to him. If he'd led a good enough life he would pass on to a place closer to the sun. If not, he could hold his reflector near the fire.

For once I researched painstakingly, browsing through the poisonous-substance books in the public library, checking and rechecking. I found that phenol and its derivatives cause sweating, thirst, cyanosis (a blue coloring of the skin that would hardly be visible on Andrew's well tanned hide), rapid breathing, coma, and death. A fatal dose was two grams. Mixed thickly with Andrew's castor-oil blend, I could use five times that and be assured he would rub it over his body in hourly ministrations before the symptoms were serious enough to interfere with his regimen. If he got his usual nine A.M. start Saturday morning, he would be red over brown over blue—and very dead by sundown.

I hesitated. I'm really not a killer at heart. I hated to think of him in pain. But, given his habit, Andrew was slowly killing himself now.

I poured the phenol into Andrew's castor-oil blend, patted Smokey as he paced by, tossed the used phenol container into the trunk of the car, and went off for a long drive.

I don't know where I went. (I thought I knew where I was going—I thought I wouldn't need a map.) Doubtless I was still in the city limits as Andrew applied the first lethal coating and lifted his reflector into place.

It was warm for April; ninety degrees by noon. I rolled down the window and kept driving. If I'd thought to check, I wouldn't have run out of gas. If I'd thought to bring my AAA card, I wouldn't have had to hitch a ride to the nearest hamlet.

The sun was low on the horizon but it was still well over a hundred

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degrees when I pulled up in front of the house. Andrew's contorted body would be sprawled beside his deck chair. I hoped Smokey hadn't made too much fuss. Cautiously I opened the door. Warily I walked through the living room.

I heard a sound in the study and moved toward it.

Andrew sat at his desk.

He looked awful, but no more so than usual.

I ran back to the car and grabbed the phenol container out of the trunk. It was too hot to hold. I dropped it, picked up an oily rag, and tried again.

Slowly I read the instructions and the warning: "If applied to skin can cause sweating, thirst, cyanosis, rapid breathing, coma, and death." I read on. "Treatment: Remove by washing skin with water. To dissolve phenol, or retard absorption, mix with castor oil."

I slumped against the car. The sun beat down. *Why wasn't I more thorough?*

Glaring at the phenol container, I read the last line on the label: "Caution: Phenol is explosive when exposed to heat or oxidizing agents."

I dropped the oily rag. But of course it was too late.

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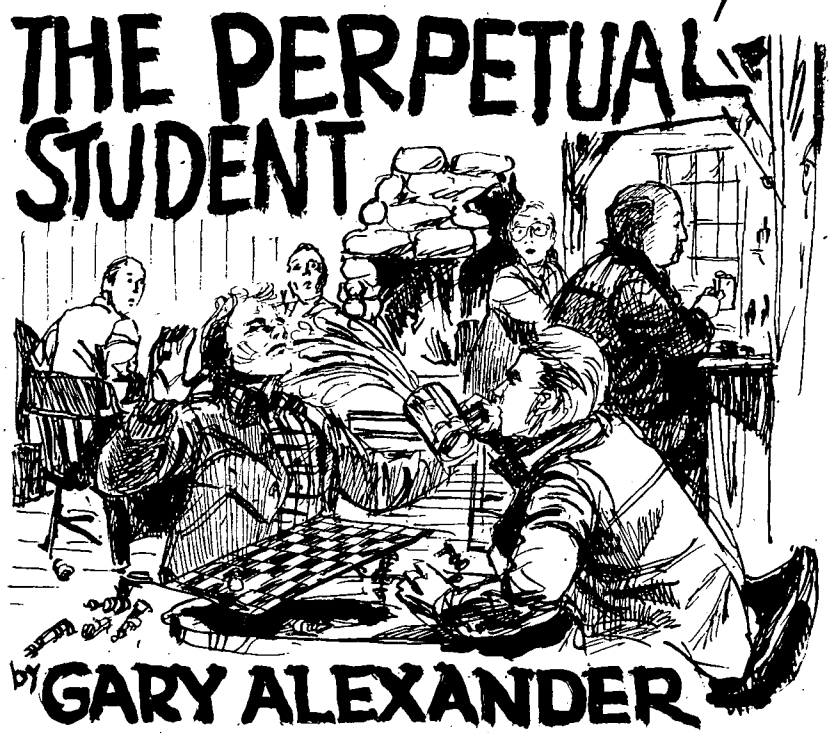
Anyone with half an education could see trouble brewing . . .

THE PERPETUAL STUDENT



by GARY ALEXANDER

The term "professional student," as applied to me, is a misnomer. I prefer "perpetual" or "perennial" student. Take your choice. "Professional" smacks of an occupation—a profession. I am not paid for my study regimen; I have never been paid for my years and years of college attendance. In fact, I have never drawn a paycheck in my life. And, as long as I can subsist and pay tuition from the interest on my modest inheritance, I intend to stay in school.

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I have been a college student for nearly half my life. I possess four bachelor's degrees, innumerable credits in countless disciplines, and am enrolled in at least two master's programs at any given time. I have never attended a graduation; the colleges simply run my transcripts through a computer periodically and mail me my parchments.

I don't think there's anything wrong with this. I'm not dissipating myself, as many in my position would. I am hardly idle and only semi-rich.

And there are worse ways of using found money.

Spring quarter had just ended. As always, I experienced relief and utter exhaustion. I decided to enjoy a brief vacation before investing the summer on a master's thesis. Since I was between girl friends at the moment, the choice of location was solely mine.

I picked Lake Harper Lodge, a stately shake-covered resort on the shore of the lake. Lake Harper lies within a Northwest rain forest and, for much of the year, ethereal puffs of mist and cloud cling to the timbered hills surrounding it. The fishing is excellent, and I love the sound of rain pelting on the lodge roof. That wet staccato always summons sleep, and sleep is a very dear commodity for me after finals week, with my head still charged with facts and figures.

I entered the lobby of the lodge, eager for its usual tranquility, but was greeted instead by a shouting match at the front desk. A large florid man jabbed a finger at the face of the lodge manager. "You assured me you had this straightened out!" he bellowed. "Then you put one of *them* in *our* wing!"

I recognized him—Ed Teagarten, president and chief executive officer of Flitt's Brewery. A couple of years ago, while enrolled in a business-management class, I had written a paper on Flitt's turnaround. Flitt's had been on its last legs until Ed Teagarten came in to lift it out of its dubious financial posture.

"Yes, sir, but he was a late arrival. All the rooms in their wing were full, so I didn't think you'd mind if—"

"Don't guess at what I'd mind! He can sleep on the lawn for all I care," Teagarten interrupted. "Get him the hell out of there or my troops and I are going to break camp!"

Before the manager could respond, Teagarten stormed off and brushed by me, a bottle of Flitt's Select in his hand.

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Evidently he didn't remember me, or he was too consumed by his own fury to care. Teagarten had introduced automation and trimmed personnel when he took over Flitt's. He may have been a hero to the stockholders, but the former employees who were out on the street characterized him as cold and ruthless. I remembered him from our brief interview as being arrogant and confident. He made no effort to rationalize what some called a purge.

I checked in, wanting to ask about the dispute, but it was all the manager could do to hold the pen steady in his hand. To appease my curiosity, I sought the next closest source of unlimited knowledge: the bartender in the cocktail lounge.

I ordered a Flitt's and sat for a few minutes, observing the lounge in the mirror behind the bar. Several things struck me as odd—the huge stuffed bear next to my stool, for one, although I supposed that it, like the mounted antlers on the walls, was mandatory decor for a rustic spot.

Much stranger were the seating arrangements of the twenty or thirty bar patrons. About one half clustered in one corner, the other half in the opposite corner. The conversation from both corners was whispered and punctuated by suspicious glances. The center tables were vacant as if that area was a minefield.

I said to the bartender, "There seems to be a lot of tension here this weekend. Why?"

He smiled. "Check the board by the dining-room entrance in the lobby."

I did.

WELCOME FLITT'S BREWERY
MANAGEMENT SEMINAR
JUNE 9–14

And

WELCOME NORTHERN BREWING
MANAGEMENT SEMINAR
JUNE 9–14

Today was June eleventh, and I imagined the seminars had been quite lively so far. I remembered Northern Brewing from my research on

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Flitt's. The two companies were the last regional brewery operations to survive in the city. Not only were they in mortal conflict with the giant national concerns, which had been trampling local brewers into bankruptcy in recent years, but they had been at each other's throats with extraordinarily aggressive advertising and marketing. Despite Northern's healthy financial base and Flitt's rebound under Teagarten, bankers and analysts felt that only one of the companies would see the beginning of the next decade. The nationwide concerns simply packed too much clout.

I returned to my bar stool, finished my Flitt's, and ordered a Northern Premium. "I see what you mean," I told the bartender.

He grinned. "You should have been here when they all arrived. I've never seen so many open mouths in my life. I thought we were going to have some fist fights in the parking lot. It's been a mess. We had to reassign all the rooms so one bunch got the east wing and the other the west. They were about to leave on the spot until they realized how tough it is to get space anywhere else decent this time of year."

"It's an awfully unlikely coincidence," I said.

He nodded. "Luckily I don't make the reservations," he said.

I considered investigating, but discarded the idea. I had come here to relax. I finished my beer, went to my room, and took a nap.

After dinner I lazed around the expansive lobby. Open-beamed ceilings, a massive stone fireplace, wicker furniture reputed to have been in residence since the lodge was built sixty years before. Another rainstorm sheeted the windows. Guests sat, read magazines and books, dozed. We were paying fifty dollars or more a day to do nothing and trying to enjoy every minute of it.

I ordered a nonpartisan bourbon at the bar and settled into a rocker next to a fish tank, where I caught fragments of conversation from the other side, at the chess table. I tried to concentrate on a magazine, but the conversation was growing louder.

I peered around the tank and saw that one of the chess players was Ed Teagarten, who appeared to be too drunk to play such a demanding game. His opponent, a stout, red-faced man about Teagarten's age, was in no better condition, but he took Teagarten's queen gleefully, knocking the tall carved-wood piece off the board with his attacking bishop. "That's check, Eddie, in case you hadn't noticed."

Teagarten glared at the man, then back down at the board.

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"Why don't you just resign, Eddie?" the man taunted.

"Shut your damn mouth," Teagarten ordered. "I'm thinking."

The man laughed. "That should be a new experience for you."

Teagarten suddenly picked up his glass of Flitt's and threw it in the man's face. His opponent leaped up and tipped the table over on Teagarten.

The Flitt's and Northern men in the lobby dropped their pipes and *Business Weeks* and rushed over to break it up. Don't ask me why, but I joined in too. It took nine of us but we finally separated them. Both men were unusually strong and enraged beyond reason. I took an elbow to the side of my face, but nothing serious; the blow didn't even dislodge my glasses.

A younger man, the only one in the room in a coat and tie, took charge, though I don't recall him helping with the physical part. "No harm done!" he said excitedly. "Howard, please! Don, hang on to him! Howard, no! Get him upstairs. You know how Ed can be. You fellows would be wise to get Ed out of here too. Good. I'll speak to the manager and iron it out. This shouldn't have happened."

The room cleared fast and I had it virtually to myself. The mediator talked to the manager for a few minutes and came away from the desk wearing a tight smile. He had made a sale.

He also looked familiar. He extended his hand. "Thanks for helping out. I apologize for your injury. It was my fault. If I'd stayed with Howard after dinner this could have been prevented. I knew he was getting tipsy and—well—Howard and Ed Teagarten in the same room is like playing catch with nitroglycerine. I'm R. J. Savage, by the way. Howard Kinsolving is president and chief executive officer of Northern Brewing. I'm his executive assistant. Where do I know you from?"

I told him I thought we might have met when I did the paper on Flitt's.

Savage snapped his fingers. "Right! The college boy. I was working for Ed then, as vice president in charge of administration."

"Why'd you change jobs?"

"You should be able to figure that out from your paper. I was caught in the crossfire when Teagarten was playing Joe Stalin. And, yes, I know what you're thinking—my present title isn't as impressive as my last. But the money's right and the challenge is there. Howard Kinsolving is a prince, Teagarten is a piranha. But I don't have to tell you that, do I?"

I didn't mind being called a college boy, though I'd never see thirty

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again nor half my hair. I answered Savage's last question with a noncommital nod. This was one fire that didn't need any more gasoline splashed on it. I changed the subject to my pre-dawn fishing plans.

Savage glanced at his watch and stood up. "Well, I'd better get upstairs with Howard. Being an executive assistant can be a twenty-four-hour-a-day job at times. By the way, what grade did you get on that paper?"

"B-plus."

Savage shrugged. "Can't win 'em all. Nice talking to you, and thanks again."

I was ready for a night's sleep, but that was delayed while I searched the combat zone for my room key, which must have fallen out of my pocket during the tussle. Finally I gave up and got another from the desk clerk. He didn't seem to mind the inconvenience. It was probably the simplest problem he'd faced since the brewers arrived.

The next morning I set up my fishing tackle, rented a boat, and tried my luck on the lake. Blue skies and calm air blessed me. Trout jumped everywhere, breakfasting on insects. Lake Harper was amply stocked with rainbow trout every year. I also knew they had a weakness for red salmon eggs. But two hours later I resigned myself to being skunked. I'd had nary a nibble.

Meanwhile, the sky had filled with angry grey puffs and they started to wring themselves on me with vigor. I rowed to the dock furiously, recalling the ten credit hours of meteorology I'd once taken, and the material covering the rain-forest phenomenon—unstable air masses, moist air fronts blocked by mountains, and so on.

I ran to my car with an empty creel, feeling like a saturated sponge. After stowing my gear I hurried upstairs to change. When I opened my door I saw Ed Teagarten sprawled on the bed, lifeless, a spot of coagulated blood on his forehead. Beside him was my pillow with a good deal of the stuffing blown out of it. I stared at him for a moment. In anatomy class we shared the laboratory with a cadaver for a whole quarter, but I never got used to it.

From pre-law I had learned not to touch anything in a circumstance such as this and that I could expect to be a suspect by virtue of proximity even if for no other reason.

Yes, it sounds absurd, but I called room service. I had to—the rooms have no direct outside lines. I convinced the bewildered clerk that I was

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serious, that "police and ambulance" was not the name of an elaborate new cocktail I wished to order. Thirty minutes later the authorities arrived.

Sheriff's Detective Lieutenant Smithers, a grim man about my age with unruly hair, led the task force. He ordered his people to fan out and learn what they could, then turned his attention to me.

Yes, I told him, I was acquainted with the deceased. No, I didn't know what he was doing in my room. I told him about the altercation I had witnessed yesterday.

Smithers ran a hand through his hair. "Just what I love," he muttered. "Contradictions and a hotel full of suspects."

An officer confirmed from the boat-rental clerk that I had been on the lake for the last two hours. The coroner showed up about then and ballparked the time of death as around two hours ago.

R. J. Savage, Johnny-on-the-spot, burst into the room. He gasped and studied the scene. "Horrible!" Yes, he told Smithers, they were competitors, but in a sense they were brothers too—in terms of their craft. Burglary? No? He didn't understand any of this. Had the media descended on us yet? He'd have to prepare a statement, he supposed.

An officer appeared carrying a revolver. "It was in a trash can at the end of the hall, Lieutenant, by the fire escape."

"This look familiar to anyone here?" Smithers asked.

"Well, it does resemble Howard Kinsolving's," Savage said. "He brings it with him when he travels. In this day and age—"

Smithers studied the gun, picked up the phone, gave the clerk a number, and talked to a computer and its keeper.

"The weapon is legally registered to Kinsolving," he said as he hung up.

R. J. Savage shook his head. "That means nothing! It could've been stolen."

I sat down by the window. The room was crowded, but I suppose I was tolerated because it was my room. Not to mention that I was by no means off the hook. The geography of the crime was of prime concern now; motivation or the lack of it would be dealt with later.

Two officers accompanied Howard Kinsolving into the room. He was in pajamas and could hardly keep his eyes open. He told Smithers he was groggy because of a hangover.

After he got his bearings, he told Smithers he was genuinely sorry this

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had happened, then related what he could remember of the previous night's trouble at the chess table.

"I want you to hear it from me," Kinsolving said. "We've been rivals ever since he took over Flitt's. I'll admit I hated his guts, but I respected his ability too. Sure, I wouldn't lose any sleep if I drove Flitt's out of business. Yeah, and I'd have got great pleasure from breaking his nose yesterday too. But murder? No way."

Savage brought in a cup of black coffee for his boss.

Smithers asked Kinsolving if anyone could verify that he had been asleep in his room all morning.

"I'm afraid not. I have a private room. Everyone else in my crew doubled up."

"I see," Smithers said. "I wonder if you'd mind coming into town with me for a while?"

"Not at all," Kinsolving said. "Everything in my life has always been up front. Not like some people."

Before they left, with Savage tagging along, Smithers asked me if I planned to stick out my week at the lodge. I don't think it was unreasonable of him to ask. I don't think it was unreasonable of me to state that I would. Kinsolving was *numero uno* on Smithers' list of suspects, but it seemed too pat, and Smithers was not a stupid man. If Kinsolving was eliminated, Smithers' fingers would begin walking down the list, and I had to be among the top three or four. If anything turned up that would clear me it might occur at Lake Harper Lodge, and I wanted to support my local police on that point in any way I could.

Justifiable paranoia, I thought as I went to the desk to arrange for another room.

I was not alone. Most of the brewery executives stayed on too, except for a few who left to supplement their skeleton crews or assist Teagarten's family.

I hung around the lodge, forgetting my vendetta against Lake Harper's trout. I kept to myself, lingering just out of range of the brewers' gatherings, listening. Which meant spending a staggering amount of time in the bar.

The first day, some of the brewers ignored me completely, while others handed out mild doses of pity, pegging me as a victim of circumstance. Still others drilled me with hostile stares, acting as vicarious judges and

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jurors. Mostly they whispered among themselves, dishing out glances of suspicion all around and theorizing about the guilt or innocence of Howard Kinsolving. Paranoia, I speculated, might be caused by an airborne virus.

Just after sundown, Kinsolving arrived back at the lodge with R. J. Savage. Savage went to the desk and asked that Mr. Kinsolving's luggage be brought down. Kinsolving strode briskly around the lobby, shaking hands and speaking briefly with key people from both Flitt's and Northern, then did the same in the bar before he and Savage departed with his luggage.

I was alone in the lobby several hours later when Savage returned. He approached me. "I'm sorry you were involved," he said.

"What's the story on Kinsolving?"

"No harm telling, I suppose. There'll be a formal announcement soon. No charges have been brought yet, but that could change. Howard has decided to resign. I begged him to take a leave of absence instead, until this mess is cleared up. He's one helluva guy. Without him at the helm I don't know what will become of Northern Brewing."

"Do you think he did it?" I asked bluntly.

He opened his mouth to answer, then paused. "I'd be inclined to say yes—but who can be sure of anything?"

A curious thing evolved shortly after breakfast on the following day. By noon the pattern was obvious. Flitt's people and the Northern people were mingling, the congeniality quotient rising by the hour. R. J. Savage had been darting about all morning like a bee in search of nectar, so I suspected it was his handiwork.

The lounge filled rapidly after lunch and, from my vantage point at the bar, I observed the blending of the two groups, the buying of drinks for one another, the exchange of words like "solidarity." *Solidarity?* I associate that word with bomb-throwing radicals, not businessmen.

I consulted the bartender, who was by then my guru, my Enlightened Master, slicing cocktail fruit near the cash register.

"Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"Odd bunch, they are. One is putting up five grand as a reward for whoever gets the guy who killed their chief arrested and convicted. Then the other bunch, who wouldn't toss him a line if he was drowning three days ago, goes and antes up five grand of their own. They're acting like they're married, talking about a whatdoyoucallit—"

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I swallowed hard. "A merger?"

"Yeah, right, a merger."

I asked for a double shot, which I gulped down. Now that the brewers were sitting at the figurative armistice table, I was more than ever the odd man out. I was on vacation with a hotel full of bounty hunters; ten thousand dollars is a magnificent incentive for perjury or a frame job. I was certain all that beer would eventually stimulate some creative thinking along those lines.

Perpetual students, in case you didn't know, experience a form of withdrawal if they are too long removed from academic stimulation. And if the research they embark on serves to remove a noose from said student's neck, all the more reason to eliminate the withdrawal pains.

I went directly to my car and sped toward town. A merger. That was the key. To what I didn't know, but I hoped the university's business library would fill in the blanks.

I read in the library till closing, slept in my car that night, and resumed study from the time the library opened until my paper was completed, about two in the afternoon. More than once I had used this frenetic technique to deliver a procrastinated term paper to a professor by the deadline. My car is hardly a king-size bed, but I didn't want the inconvenience of being rousted at my apartment to explain my sudden departure. I was certain Smithers had been notified of my absence from the lodge.

I was right. I called Smithers just before starting back.

"My phone's been ringing off the hook," he said dryly. "You have a lot of friends up there who are concerned over your whereabouts."

I asked him to meet me at the lodge. He said that wasn't overly convenient—why didn't I just come on downtown? I said I had the name of Ed Teagarten's killer. He told me to drive safely and he would meet me in the side parking lot at the lodge.

He pulled in ten minutes after I did. I got into his car and asked, "Is it all right if I play devil's advocate with myself on this?"

He sighed and lit a cigarette. "As long as you don't make a filibuster out of it."

"One request first though. Who reserved the conferences for whom, and when? The lodge people wouldn't tell me."

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"The Flitt's conference was reserved by phone on March twenty-fifth. A letter from Northern, signed by R. J. Savage, came in several days later."

"So if he took care of it by letter, no lodge employee could tell him on the phone that they'd be sharing the facilities with a rival company. And I imagine Savage kept the seminar location a secret—a surprise—until the last minute."

"So?"

"R. J. Savage is your killer."

Smithers took a deep drag from his cigarette and closed his eyes. "Wonderful. Do you have a signed confession?"

"No, and I doubt if one's forthcoming. Savage is pretty light on his feet. *Now* may I play devil's advocate?"

"Do."

"O.K. Why was Teagarten killed in my room? Because I was in the Flitt's wing, and Teagarten's room was right down the hall. Very convenient.

"Why didn't Kinsolving do it? Why *couldn't* he have done it? Because he was the mortal enemy and would have been noticed—kind of like Hitler strolling through SHAEF Headquarters just before D-Day.

"But how could Savage have done it, Savage being Kinsolving's Martin Bormann? Easy. He knew I was going fishing and would be up and out before anybody else. He slipped into my room and waited for Teagarten as soon as I left for the lake.

"Why did Teagarten go to my room? Because Savage called him the previous night, after the ruckus, representing himself as me. He told Ed 'I' was now doing research on Northern and had discovered something very juicy, possibly incriminating about Northern, Flitt's might want to exploit. 'I' probably asked for money. That would lend authenticity. Teagarten really *was* a piranha; he would understand that kind of approach.

"How did Savage get into my room? During the scuffle at the chess table, my key may have fallen out of my pocket and he picked it up, or he could even have lifted it from me when we talked later. No doubt he arranged the whole ruckus. The fight was perfect. When we talked after the brawl, everything fell into place for him.

"What was his motive? He certainly wasn't in the natural succession to Kinsolving's job. I suspect he was no more than a gofer, hired on after he was canned by Teagarten more for the inside dope he had on Flitt's

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than for his charm and ability. Well, nature abhors a vacuum, as they say, and with the two old war horses out of the picture, things could be wide open. A huge *could be*, I'll admit. If both breweries carried on as before, there would probably be no advantage to Savage. But with the cornerstones of the hatred gone, and if discussions toward a logical agreement took place, the man spearheading the discussion would have a big jump on potential rivals."

Smithers said, "What would this logical agreement be?"

I handed him my notes.

Smithers paged through them while I summarized. "You're looking at indisputable evidence that a merger is the only chance for survival for both breweries. The big nationals are on a tear. You can't watch TV for ten minutes without seeing one of their commercials. There are half as many breweries in the country as there were ten years ago, and more are bound to drop by the wayside.

"Look at the profit figures for both Flitt's and Northern. Their gross revenue has risen, but the numbers are partly the result of inflation. Study the net profit, the bottom line. The ratio between gross and net is getting larger for each company. And the biggies are bracketing their products with new products of their own.

"Note the capital expenditures for both Northern and Flitt's. They aren't even trying to counterattack with new lines. Any knowledgeable banker would hide under his desk if he saw either of them coming in to borrow the capital. But united we stand, divided we fall. United, they can probably stand, with R. J. Savage in charge—unless you lock him up."

Smithers perused the report further, chain-smoking. "You've done a nice job. But there's nothing solid enough to take to the prosecuting attorney."

"There's the revenge motive too," I reminded him. "Ed Teagarten made Savage walk the plank, remember."

"I know, but he's not the only one. Some other Northern people here were fired from Flitt's along with him."

"Did you take a blood sample from Kinsolving on the day of the murder? He looked to me like he was drugged. Savage probably loaded his bedtime toddy with something and took his gun after he tucked him in the night before."

"We don't go around taking blood samples just like that. But say we

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had? Who's to say he didn't pop a pill himself after he plugged Teagarten? Look, it's been interesting, but I've got some duties in town and I've already got a couple of guys assigned here, so if you don't have anything hard for me—"

"I'm really sorry to have wasted your time," I snapped, "but I've never taken a criminology class."

"That's O.K."

"Where do *I* stand on this? Can you tell me that?" I needed *something* for my work. I sure as hell wasn't going to get a credit or a grade.

"You?" he said, genuinely surprised. "We have a magician for a coroner. He locked it in pretty tight. You were on the lake—no question. How's the fishing, by the way?"

I stepped out of the car impatiently. "Great. I get my limit every day."

"Oh, yeah? I'm thinking of coming up here in August. What are they biting on?"

I waved him off. "Red salmon eggs, Lieutenant. You can't miss."

The ten-thousand-dollar check landed in my mailbox in late October, two weeks after the announcement of the merger. It was crisp and attractive, had a Flitt's-Northern Inc. logo, and bore the signature of Howard J. Kinsolving, board chairman.

R. J. Savage's trial had just ended. I had been on the witness stand for an entire day, missing crucial classroom time and a mid-term exam, as well as a session on fingerprinting in Criminology 101. My testimony had proved to be of no consequence. The statements of the present president and senior vice-president of Flitt's-Northern Inc. had done him in. The human memory works funny tricks; they had been up for a pre-dawn jog and had seen Savage headed for Flitt's wing. The significance of that hadn't hit them until Savage's indictment. They described the sight in great detail on the witness stand.

Savage had purchased the services of a legendary trial lawyer. He possessed the hand gestures of a hypnotist and the voice of an operatic baritone. You know the kind. The actual deed hadn't been seen, so a great deal was made of Teagarten's temper.

Savage is now serving time in a minimum-security institution.

I mailed the check back and then sent a thanks-anyway note to Lieutenant Smithers. He must have followed up on what I'd given him, despite his attitude. I suppose he put a bug in somebody's ear at Flitt's-Northern.

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You see, cashing that check would make me a professional something—not a single-minded student.

I plan to take Criminology 102 and 103 too.

I'm considering the ocean for next summer. If I can get a beachfront cabin, I won't be able to hear much but the surf and the relentless wind. Like the pounding rain, those sounds also help me sleep. And the privacy should be wonderful.

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Uncle Dudley was a wanderer with no ties . . .

A WAY WITH A WILL

by TALMAGE POWELL

I was very fond of my Uncle Dudley Gillam. Not for any singular reason. He was my only blood relation, but that didn't account entirely for my feeling. I've heard other people speak of their relatives with shuddering distaste, but my recollections of Uncle Dudley were pleasurable. He found joy in living; he was agreeable, kind, and thoughtful. He was an all-around likeable individual, and I liked him. That's all there was to it. And the regard was mutual. He never put it into words, but he left no

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doubt in my mind that I was at the top of his list of favorite people.

After he retired from the railroad we saw little of each other. He was an engineer until age forced him out of the big diesels. Not a strapping Casey Jones, but a wiry, tough little guy who ramrodded the long trains through the nights like a runty cowboy forking a dinosaur.

His years of motion had conditioned him to be restless. He was always on the go. He would wander down to Florida, up to big-game country in Wyoming, out to California. He would hit Vegas now and then for a splurge and, broke and hungover, amble down to Corpus Christi to dry out.

We always kept in touch. He pecked out letters on a portable typewriter with broken type and an always-grey ribbon, signing them with his bold flourish. The grammar was questionable but the details were colorful. When he wrote about the rupture of a radiator hose while he was driving across the Painted Desert you could hear the water sizzle.

He enjoyed sending picture postcards and wild greeting cards from various locales. On my birthday a zany card would enclose a twenty-dollar bill for the purpose of "oiling up a sweet patootie in a cozy bar, courtesy your Unc Dud."

I always responded, jazzing up the details of my dreary bachelor existence as much as possible. Each Christmas I would try to send him something special—not expensive, necessarily, but something I had shopped carefully for. The kind of Wellington pipe he smoked or one of the baggy sweaters he favored.

Since he was a gregarious extrovert, it didn't surprise me he was a soft touch. He always had a dollar for the panhandling wino with the seared eyes and burning throat. He never passed up a Salvation Army kettle or the poor box on his infrequent trips to church. And now and then some down-and-outer would hang onto his shirttails for a while. A busted madam, a kid just out of jail, or an itinerant worker stranded in Salinas. Or someone like Odus Calhoun, dubbed "Hardtimes" by Uncle Dudley.

"A born loser," Uncle Dudley wrote. "One of those birds who gets all the frowns of fate—that's Odus Calhoun. Worked hard all his life, paid his taxes, and never broke a law. And what did it get Hardtimes? Flat busted in Dallas where I met him, for one thing. Wife dead, and three kids grown up and scattered who'd rather forget him.

"If Hardtimes crosses a street, the drivers nearly run him down. A stray dog follows him home and the first time Hardtimes lets the mutt

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out the dog catcher is cruising by. The last jalopy he managed to buy turned out to be stolen. He cashed a welfare check and was robbed in sight of a police station. I reckon if Hardtimes inherited a gold mine an earthquake would dump the vein to the boiling center of the earth."

From later letters I gathered that Hardtimes had settled into the role of handyman, cook, valet, friend, and confidant. "He more than earns his keep," Uncle Dudley wrote, "and it's nice to have a fellow critter around. He can't play checkers worth a damn, so I finally know the joy of winning."

It seemed to be a good arrangement. Uncle Dudley buffered Hardtimes Calhoun from the jaundiced eye of fate and at the same time escaped the loneliness of his wandering life.

But the fortunate circumstance was relatively short-lived. Three years ago Uncle Dudley wrote me the woeful news.

"Lost my pal. We was on the way to L.A. in my pickup with the camper cover. We stopped for the night at a campground near Yuma, and I couldn't wake up Hardtimes the next morning. The county coroner said he died peaceful in his sleep from a worn-out heart. I gave him a decent funeral and searched his duffel without finding the addresses of any of his kids. They may never know how their poor old pappy met his end."

He never referred to Hardtimes again and I respected his wish to leave a painful subject reverently closed.

A new wrinkle in our correspondence was added a couple of years ago. Instead of a twenty, a hundred-dollar bill dropped from one of his offbeat greeting cards. "I put some money where the profit is," he explained. "So simmer yourself a real high-class patootie this time."

And my last birthday turned up a blank check signed by Uncle Dudley. "Don't go wilder than a hog, nephew, but if you hanker to tootle around in a little sports car, do your shopping. Happy birthday, village cut-up."

His rapidly expanding affluence naturally tickled my curiosity, but he volunteered no details of his financial dealings, and I courteously cramped the urge to pry. I satisfied myself with a guess that he'd hit a run of beginner's luck in the stock market. His business hadn't pinned him down. He was still here and there on the map like a flea on a short-haired pup.

The most recent letter from him said: "Writing from the mugginess of a New Orleans August. Going up to Asheville, North Carolina, for a

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breath of summer-resort air. Drop me a note at the Great Smokies Chilton, Suite Charnot."

His plans offered me the chance to visit. I had vacation time coming, and the owner of the construction company where I worked had a Porsche he wanted delivered to his daughter, who was in an Atlanta college. With tin hat in hand I appeared in the boss's office and explained my proposition. He went for the idea, handed me the keys to the car, slapped my shoulder, and counted out more than enough cash to cover the expenses of delivering the car.

From Atlanta to Asheville by air is a matter of minutes, and I arrived on a deliciously cool Smoky Mountain day after I'd delivered the Porsche. I rented a car and drove a modest four-lane expressway ten miles north, took an exit ramp, moved westerly in a snarl of city traffic, and at last was wending up a coolly shaded macadam road. Valleys, rolling mountains, and the scanty skyline of Asheville spread in the distance. A final turn and the Great Smokies Chilton swam into view.

It was a Swiss architect's dream, worth a pursed-lip whistle. The huge main inn extended a warm invitation. Webbed from it were driveways winding to private chalets tucked into rolling, landscaped mountain greenery. People were sunning, swimming, and loafing at a crystalline lake scooped into the mountainside. At a long sweep of tennis courts, lazier players had knocked off to watch a smashing drive match between two lean, bronzed young giants. Beyond the courts I glimpsed a pair of horses and riders dipping into a steep mountain trail. I slowed for the passage of a golf cart as it chugged across the parking area with two elderly occupants, headed toward the green-velvet golf course that wandered across the plaateau near the crest of the mountain.

A Mercedes SEL was gliding from a parking place near the canopied entrance to the inn and I slipped my rented car into the vacated slot.

I got out, giving the surroundings an appreciative survey. A small plaque over the brass-studded door of the nearest private chalet caught my eye. AIN. I lifted my eyes to Ain's next-door neighbor. The sedate plaque there announced: BRAUN.

I figured out that the third chalet was Charnot, Uncle Dudley's domicile of the moment.

I was itching to know something about the late-in-life financial wizardry that afforded Uncle Dudley spots like this in which to take the mountain air. But even that was secondary to the thought of seeing him. I was a

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little giddy as I hurried along the driveway and the feeling wasn't entirely due to the altitude.

I checked the plaque to make sure my guess was correct, and it was. I turned into the flower-bordered fieldstone walk bisecting the narrow lawn just as the door opened. It framed a blonde wearing a sleeveless white dress. She was young and tanned and so mistily lovely that I wavered to a halt, staring for a moment.

"Hi there," I said. That was certainly original.

She said nothing, looking at me with eyes of cool green. I was sure she'd spotted me during my brief walk to Charnot and was about to tell me to get lost.

"I'm Jeremy Fisher," I said. "I was looking for my uncle."

"Jake-o!" she said with a sudden flash of a smile, using Uncle Dudley's nickname for me. Her green eyes warmed. "I should have recognized you from the pictures Dudley has of you." She reached out a hand. "Come in, Jeremy!"

I entered the cool of Charnot, where I got the impression of a well-heeled sportsman's lodge. A large living room panelled in wormy chestnut was furnished with huge tweedy couches and club chairs, tables and a bar of natural oak, and a fireplace fit for five-foot logs. The ceiling was vaulted and beamed. A heavy oaken stairway led to a gallery overlooking the living room, where bedrooms were tucked under the rear portion of the expansive roof. "Nice, isn't it?" she said.

"Very."

"Would you like a drink?"

"I wouldn't mind a wee Scotch."

The flash of her legs and movement of her hips was something to watch as she went around behind the bar. Leave it to Uncle Dudley to winnow out the best.

"I'm Amanda," she said.

"Well, hello, Amanda. Have you known Uncle Dudley long?"

She tipped a glance at me, probing, balancing my words and anything that might lurk behind them. "Almost a year. And the situation is something like you've guessed. I'm fond of Dudley and he's fond of me; we travel about and have fun."

"Lucky people."

"Also, I'm a very good secretary and manager. So it isn't altogether a case of a wealthy older man buying himself a dumb blonde toy."

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"I can believe that—and I like your frankness."

"Just to get us off on the right foot, Jake-o."

I took the drink she held out to me and watched her make herself a small one. A social gesture, not the drink of a real drinker.

"I wish you'd warned us you were coming. Dudley will be so disappointed."

"Isn't he here?"

She shook her head. "He went off to Miami earlier today. He's seeing some people down there on business. He left me here to take care of some details and correspondence before I join him."

I felt a pang of disappointment.

She touched my hand and said softly, "I'm sorry, Jeremy."

"Well—" I lifted and dropped my shoulders "—I guess it was a childish notion when you get right down to it—the urge to surprise him." I tossed off the Scotch.

She took my glass and set it on the bar. "A very nice notion, I'd call it."

We drifted across the room to the door. She offered her hand in a farewell gesture. "I wish I had more time, Jake-o, but Dudley does have the habit of leaving me to pick up the last-minute bits and pieces. My schedule is tighter than strangulation."

"Tell him I came by, Amanda."

"Of course. He'll write you immediately, I know."

I plodded disconsolately to the car, got in, and was about to turn the ignition key when I realized I'd been ushered out so fast I hadn't found out where Uncle Dudley was staying in Miami. After all, I was on vacation—why not join him there?

I got out of the car and walked back to Charnot. I was about to press the bell when I heard Amanda's voice, sharply raised.

"Yes, you do owe me an explanation, Dudley! You've told me a dozen and one times that if Jeremy ever shows up in person to tell him you're away, get rid of him. You've literally ground it into my brain. Why? Those letters you write are so filled with warmth, I should think you'd want to—"

A male voice grunted something I didn't quite catch, but it was enough to break her off.

"Under the circumstances, it is too my business!" Amanda said.

The male voice inched up a grim level. "Amanda, I don't owe you an

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explanation or a damned thing else. You're beautiful, but that's a plentiful commodity. If you like the good life we lead together, get off my back!"

Her voice dropped to acquiescence while I stood dumb. What was going on? What did Uncle Dudley have to hide from me?

I grasped the doorknob, turned it, and, after the barest hesitation, opened the door.

Amanda spun to face me so quickly her gossamer-blonde hair brushed about her cheeks and she almost tripped on the expensive luggage, old airline stubs dangling from their handles, that she—or Uncle Dudley—had taken from a nearby closet in the few minutes since I'd left.

"I should ask you—" I began.

I glimpsed a frightened flicker in her eyes as her gaze speared past my shoulder, then heard the rustle of his movement. He used a heavy brass lamp, scooped from the table beside the doorway. The blow almost jarred my eyes from their sockets.

I came out of it with a gremlin soldering my ears together and the taste of burned Scotch in my throat. I crawled, groaning, across the thick russet carpet, grappled with the edge of a chair, and pulled myself up.

I turned my head and studied the scene groggily. They'd closed the door on the way out. The baggage was gone. The brass lamp lay where it had fallen. I squinted at my watch—I'd been out for about an hour.

I thought of the old baggage checks on the suitcases and garment bags and it gave me a hunch.

The small but modern Asheville airport was briskly busy. People queued at the ticket counter, moved around the spacious waiting room, sat reading.

Through a rift in the crowd I caught the glint of sunlight on bright blonde hair. I moved aside, people off an incoming flight brushing past on their way to the baggage room.

Amanda and a strange man were standing on the further side of the waiting room near the tall windows that gave a view of the landing field and the jumble of mountains beyond.

Somewhat aloofly, Amanda was gazing at the scenery outside. The man kept glancing at the bank of time-zone clocks on the northern wall. He was clearly fidgeting for a flight due to be announced shortly.

He was tall, thin, and slightly stooped, with the look of a mournful

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hound dog. His hair was grey and thin on his narrow skull. He was wearing expensive blue slacks and a mottled sports jacket, but he looked a little like the boondocks despite the cut of the clothing.

He said something. Amanda nodded without looking at him. He moved across the lobby and I eased over to let the flow of people shield me from his sight. When he reached the open archway leading to the ticket booths, he turned right, out of sight.

I followed quickly. Around the ell, a door was swinging shut. It carried a simple message: MEN.

I pushed inside. He was alone, standing at one of the washbasins lifting a pellet from a pillbox and chasing it down with water from a paper cup.

As he lifted his head, my image spread across the mirror behind him. His movement stopped as if his chin had hit an abutment. He clutched the edge of the washbasin, his already grey face a shade more ashen.

"Hi," I said. "It's me—Jeremy. And since Amanda knows you as Dudley Gillam, you must be my uncle."

His head dropped.

"Who are you, actually?" I asked. "Could it be—" I caught my breath. "Who was buried in Yuma those years ago? Hardtimes Calhoun? Or Dudley Gillam, with a death certificate made out in the name of Calhoun?"

He turned to face me, his mouth twitching. "I swear to you, he died of natural causes, Jeremy. I wouldn't have harmed a hair on your uncle's head. He was the best friend I ever had."

There was a stretch of silence, broken only by the hiss of a leaky latrine.

"I guess it took some thinking about, that morning you found Dudley Gillam dead in the camper," I said. "First the idea, then wrestling with it, then giving in. You knew he had only one relative, a nephew named Jeremy Fisher. You knew all about Jeremy from Uncle Dudley. Dudley was a no-ties wanderer, and there didn't seem to be a single obstacle in your way. All you had to do was bury him as Hardtimes Calhoun in a town where no one knew either of you and take his place. Once you mastered his simple signature, his pension checks, his bank account, all his earthly possessions were yours. You could keep on writing the never-seen nephew the kind of letters Dudley had always written. Keep one jump ahead of the nephew and you were safe for life. Am I getting it fairly close?"

He raised bloodshot eyes. "Almost dead on the nailhead, Jeremy."

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"What then, Hardtimes? Where did the money start coming from—the big money?"

"Piece of life, part of living," Hardtimes said. "I guess I buried the hard times right there in Yuma. I'd had nothing but hard times from my cradle until I dug that grave, but when I wheeled out of Yuma in that camper pickup I left it all behind. I felt like a new man—like a cocksure Dudley Gillam—and I acted like a new man."

He turned. It wasn't a suspicious movement. The single thing he dreaded, the only thing he had had to fear, had happened. He ran water, pulled down a paper towel, and wiped his grey face.

"In the old existence everything turned to mud," he said. "But once I had buried myself, I began encountering all the luck I'd missed in a lifetime."

He tossed the damp towel into a container. "Dudley had three thousand dollars in a savings account, his sole estate except for his pension checks and that camper. I ran the three to twenty thousand in a run at a craps table in Las Vegas. Drifted to Phoenix and won a hundred and fifty acres of land from a fellow in a stud game. It turned out to be worthless desert—but three months later a fellow from the government turned up. He had traced me, as Dudley Gillam, through my forwarding addresses. It scared the pants off me at first. But he was a purchasing agent, and Uncle Sam bought the desert land as a solar-energy pilot site."

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars an acre. He was tickled to get it so cheap."

"But even a hundred and fifty thousand doesn't guarantee a lifetime at playgrounds like the Great Smokies Chilton and Miami."

"You're right about that. But I ran into a guy in Fort Worth, a wildcat oil man rigged up in Venezuela. Some minor civil troubles, guerrillas from the mountains, busted him up and he had run short of cash. He'd hopped up to the States to raise some. He needed a partner with a quick hundred thousand to see the drilling to completion."

"And," I said mind-boggled, "you brought in the wells."

"Like water out of this faucet," Hardtimes Calhoun said.

"How much are you worth now?"

"I'm not sure. I guess I could sell out my interest for five or six million."

I drew in my breath.

"Now that you know—" His lank body began to pull itself together. He was mastering the hangdog guilt in his eyes. His lips were thinning,

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hardening. "What next? I owe you three thousand plus the interest on it and some pension checks and the interest on them. The only law I broke was to bury the wrong man—who had died of natural causes, as the Yuma coroner attested. Against my kind of money, you'd never make it in court if you tried to claim more than your just due."

The idea of trying to fight his amassed wealth inspired some hard thinking.

Only he and I knew the truth. He was Dudley Gillam, even to Amanda. He was Dudley Gillam—and I was his sole heir.

I had a deep-down certainty that he hadn't drawn a will cutting me out. His subconscious guilt would have forestalled that. And even if there should be a will, it could be destroyed, set aside. When there is enough money there is a way with a will.

I let a ruefully pleasant smile work to life on my lips. "It's a different reunion than I'd planned, Uncle Dudley."

"You mean—you're going to accept it?"

I nodded. "Why not? What good would it do to fight you? I take my hat off to you. In many ways, you're very much like the man you buried in Yuma."

And the man, I thought, I'll bury in Miami. A neat little accident. Maybe an overdose of some of his medication. Or a cramp when he went swimming in the ocean. Or an unfortunate fall down a stairway. Accidents are always happening to geezers his age.

"You don't have to duck me any longer, Uncle Dudley."

As we strolled out together, I dropped my arm across his shoulders. My touch was light, but he'd soon learn it was the returning touch of hard times—the hardest of all times.

The April 29 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale April 2.

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The intruder was scum, Miss March told him . . .

ONE DOWN

by CARROLL MAYERS

Harry's was a quiet, unpretentious side-street tavern which catered primarily to an elderly local trade, tolerating no flickering television, flashing pinball machine, or raucous jukebox. There was, however, a small radio, which was turned on nightly for the newscast.

One evening, following a particularly unpleasant item, several of the regulars exchanged speculative glances. Arnold, an off-duty apartment-house doorman, finally spoke. "Did you hear that, Miss March?"

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The middle-aged spinster who was working a crossword puzzle at a corner table looked up. She was a pleasant-featured woman with bright blue eyes behind thick lenses. "I beg your pardon?"

"There's been another mugging," Arnold said. "A woman was attacked and her purse snatched just three blocks from here."

Miss March dropped her pencil. "Was she badly hurt?"

"Apparently not," Arnold said. "But she could have been. A woman's not safe on the streets alone at night with all these muggings and holdups. You should remember that, Miss March."

"Pooh," said Miss March. "Besides, Lester always walks me home."

Lester, not yet in attendance, was a railroad pensioner who had never married. He was also the principal reason for Miss March's constant patronage. The duo had found each other to be kindred spirits. They played gin, worked crossword puzzles, and drank a discreet amount of sweet wine. In short, theirs was a warm relationship engendered by the environs of the tavern itself.

Arnold persisted. "Lester walks you home, sure, but you *come* here alone—"

"Pooh," Miss March repeated. "I can take care of myself."

Arnold subsided. "I tried."

Harry, the proprietor, was no less concerned about the problem. He and Arnold and Charlie, a part-time cabbie, had discussed Miss March's safety only a few evenings before, prior to Lester's and the lady's arrival.

"It's still dangerous, even with Lester walking her home," Charlie had pointed out. "He's no match physically for some young mugger."

Harry sighed. "But she won't listen."

"Maybe if it wasn't Lester," Arnold suggested. "I mean, somebody stronger, more fit."

Charlie latched onto the thought. "Say—that's it: an escort with real muscle." He eyed the proprietor. "Like your cousin, Harry. Isn't he on the police force? You could ask him to sort of convoy Miss March and Lester back and forth."

Harry shook his head. "I've thought of that," he said. "And from the physical angle it'd be great—George is a karate expert and this is his beat—but the department would never stand for it."

"The department wouldn't have to know."

The proprietor still demurred. "George is on a schedule, Charlie, subject to whatever may come up at any time. It just wouldn't work."

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Several evenings after the latest mugging incident, Miss March and Lester occupied their customary table, playing cards. It was an inclement night; gusty rain squalls had reduced trade. At the moment, the tavern's only other patrons were Arnold and Charlie, who were playing darts.

Abruptly, the street door was wrenched open and a young man lurched inside. He was breathing hard, his thin features grim and calculating. "All right, pop," he instructed Harry. "Lock this door and shut the blinds. You're closed."

Harry had been polishing glasses. He dropped the towel, blinking in disbelief, as the youth whipped out a switchblade knife.

"Move!"

The knife swept the premises in a tight arc.

Harry sidled from behind the bar and followed orders. At their table, Miss March and Lester goggled mutely. Arnold and Charlie were similarly transfixed.

Satisfied for the moment, the hoodlum kicked a chair free from a side table and sat down, the knife at his elbow. "The rest of you just stay put." He was an unkempt character in his early twenties, wearing dirty sneakers, soiled jeans, and an out-of-shape T-shirt.

Miss March recovered from her initial astonishment. The scenario was patent: a grubby punk fleeing the scene of a mugging or attempted purse-snatching, probably under immediate police pursuit in the area, and seeking temporary sanctuary in the tavern. Her sniff was audible.

The youth whirled on her.

"Something eating you, lady?"

"You're scum," she told him flatly.

His thin lips quirked. "Shut up."

"You're despicable," Miss March said. She left her table and stood before him. "You're not man enough to work for a living. You skulk about the streets—"

"I said shut up!"

"—and prey on helpless people." Miss March's scorn grew. "You're scum."

The hoodlum swore, sprang to his feet, and swiped Miss March across the mouth. Miss March wailed and crumpled.

Stunned, none of the others made a move. Glowering, the punk bent over Miss March. "You got such a smart mouth, you're lucky I didn't slash you."

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On the floor Miss March shifted slightly and the hoodlum broke off, belatedly seeing that she had palmed a small metallic cylinder. Before he could straighten up, an acrid chemical spurted from the cylinder and he yelped, staggering erect and pawing at his eyes. Whereupon Harry snatched the wine bottle Miss March and Lester had been sharing and lodged it smartly against the intruder's skull.

"It's called a Public Defender," Miss March explained to her shaken associates. "It's something like tear gas. You all have been talking about street crime so much that I decided a little extra precaution wouldn't hurt."

Arnold licked his dry lips. "Even so, you were mighty brave to face up to him and use it like that."

Charlie and Lester agreed.

Miss March said, "I only taunted him into giving me the chance." She straighted her dress. "Harry's the one who really acted."

"I only followed your play, Miss March." Harry eyed the hoodlum's unconscious form uncertainly. "The question is, what do we do now?"

Charlie looked puzzled. "Don't we call the police?"

Harry said slowly, "We could—only what happens when we do?"

"What else *can* we do?" Lester asked.

"I'm not sure," Harry said. "I'm only suggesting what's likely to follow if we do call and the police collect this punk."

Miss March indicated sudden comprehension. "I know what Harry means. What's likely to follow, essentially, is nothing. This scum—" and her tone was again laced with contempt "—shows up in court and some mush-headed judge gives him a lecture and puts him back on the street in twenty minutes. Or some public defense lawyer convinces a jury it's all a misunderstanding and his client's an underprivileged kid who was only trying to get away from some street gang that threatened him."

"Threatened *him*?" Charlie sputtered. "He stormed in here and threatened *us!*"

"With a switchblade knife," Lester put in indignantly.

Miss March's rejoinder was sober. "Those knives are illegal, yes—but it would be our word against his that he threatened us with it." She turned to the proprietor. "Isn't that what you're intimating, Harry? That there's every possibility this vermin will be as free next week as he was tonight, so he can terrorize us again and continue to make our streets unsafe?"

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Harry's jaw set. "Exactly."

Charlie was becoming agitated. "All right," he said. "I can follow that. So there's no true justice in dozens of cases. But what can we do?"

Harry moved over and sat down at the table Lester and Miss March had occupied.

"Like I said, I'm not sure. But I have an idea."

Some fifteen minutes later, when the intruder regained consciousness, he found himself securely lashed to a straight-backed chair. The chair, in turn, was the sole piece of furniture in a small windowless room. Scant illumination came from a naked drop light bulb.

Five shadowy figures ringed the chair.

Its occupant mouthed an obscenity. "What is this?"

Harry answered tersely. "This is my basement storeroom. You can yell all you like, but nobody'll hear you." As if an afterthought, he added, "We've removed most of the stock—in case you eventually work yourself free and get violent."

The hoodlum's dark eyes narrowed.

"Whaddaya mean, *eventually?*"

"I had a sudden notion," Harry said. "I'm closing the tavern tonight and taking a month's vacation."

"And he'll lock up the place real tight," Lester said. "*All* the rooms."

Perspiration began to bead the punk's forehead. "Look, you stupid jerks—"

Miss March wore a beatific smile. "Oh, but we're not stupid. We're quite intelligent. For instance, we know the human body can subsist for weeks without food, but only for a few days without water."

The hoodlum cursed again, grasping the grim quintet's intent. "No! You won't get away with this—"

"If we don't," Lester told him, "*you'll* never know it."

The five moved to the storeroom door, a thick, solid plank, snug-fitting and provided with stout hinges and a heavy outer bolt. Only Arnold appeared hesitant to accept the action of his associates, but that reluctance did not last.

Miss March's beatitude had vanished now; her blue eyes were bleak. "Goodbye, scum," she whispered.

The massive door slammed shut.

The outer bolt shot home.

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His senses reeling, his thoughts utterly chaotic, the hoodlum yelled for a quarter of an hour after his captors departed. He struggled frantically with his bonds, but could secure no slack or purchase. Wrenching about in the chair, he overbalanced and crashed to the abrasive cement floor. His voice gave out and he began to sob. It was true: nobody would ever hear him. Even if he finally managed to untie himself he'd never get out of the room. He *would* die here—

And then the faint rasp of metal on metal impinged on his floundering consciousness. And Arnold sidled hesitantly into the storeroom.

"Are—are you all right?"

Heady relief flooded the punk. "You—! How can I be, trussed up like this? Untie me!"

Uncertain, Arnold knelt, fumbled with the knots. "I—I didn't want to leave you," he stammered. "That would've been murder. But Harry—the owner—insisted, and he got the others to go along." Arnold's mouth quirked. "Before we left, though, I managed to duck back and unlock the rear door so I could come back—"

The ropes were loose now. The hoodlum rolled free of the chair, flexing his arms and legs, heaved to his knees, then to his feet. Fury smoldered in his gaze. "Harry!" he raged. "The only vacation that creep's taking will be in the hospital—"

He whirled and grabbed Arnold's shirtfront. "Where's his pad?"

"Eh?"

"Harry! Where does he live?"

Arnold cringed. "I—I don't know—"

"Don't give me that! You'll tell me or I'll break both your arms!"

"Please—"

A savage grip paralyzed Arnold's right elbow. "Where does he live? *Where?*"

Arnold bleated in pain and gave the address.

The quintet held a jubilant celebration at the tavern the following night.

"You're sure your elbow's all right?" Miss March asked Arnold.

"Positive," he said. "It didn't hurt long. And it was worth it."

"You were great," Charlie told him. "Acting like you weren't with us."

"You were all right," Harry assured them. "We wouldn't have carried it off otherwise." As he spoke, he indicated a headline in the evening

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paper. HOODLUM COLLARED IN BREAK-IN OF POLICE OFFICER'S APARTMENT.

"Your cousin sort of surprised him," Lester suggested.

Harry smiled. "Like I told you, I remembered it was George's night off and figured he'd probably be home. Of course, we could've phoned George, told him he was likely to have a visitor, but I think it was better that we didn't compromise him in any way."

Harry reviewed the newspaper report. "It tells about George being a karate expert—says he roughed up the intruder quite a bit. The fact that he apprehended him in the act of breaking in—and will so testify—should deter even the softest judge and jury from setting him free in a hurry."

"So that's at least one down," Miss March said soberly.

"Meanwhile," Harry said, "let's celebrate. Maybe we can come up with some other ideas about how to be safe at home and in public places." And he uncorked a bottle of choice wine.

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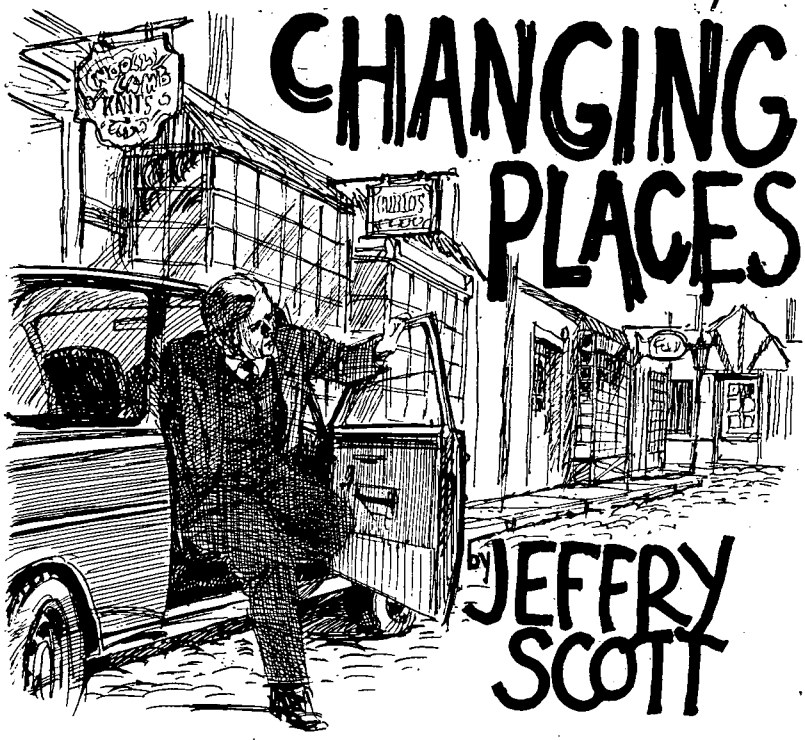
The butcher hated his work . . .



She doomed the wretched Cartaret just by sending him to the village.

But then any woman christened Doris who insists on calling herself Olga and matching the name is quite likely to be capricious, and widowed Mrs. Delisle did her best to fulfill the expectation.

Olga Delisle selected some lovers much as she bought clothes, and her closets were crammed with things she never bothered to wear.

Lionel Cartaret, arriving at her jewel-box country cottage expecting

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what older English roués still think of as a dirty weekend, found himself sharing the abode on terms of strictest moral hygiene. Not for him the mistress' bedroom, in any sense of the term.

Worse still— "Lionel, you're getting fat," she remarked on Saturday morning. No way to talk to a man who preferred to see himself as burly.

Cartaret, however, was a slow learner and an optimist—and Olga was a beauty. He took her unkind sally meekly, feigning not to hear.

"Fat," she repeated firmly and more loudly. "You'd better toddle down to the village—get some weight off. Besides, you can do some shopping for me."

Errand boy, confounded errand boy? Cartaret demanded of himself, losing several chins as his head came up in displeasure. And after enduring the whole previous evening of deft evasions, giggly wrist-slaps?

"The butcher's shop is second on the left past the church. There are only four shops at the village green, so you can't miss it," she informed him blandly. "Now be a good boy and fetch us two prime steaks."

In Lionel Cartaret's abiding, dominating love affair with L. Cartaret, Esquire, his tummy was just about his favorite area. Steak didn't sound half bad.

"I'll make you a lovely lunch," Olga cooed, blowing him a kiss across the table.

Cartaret strutted out. He still had it; struggle as she might, she was avid for him! Walking the best part of three miles on a windless summer day was out of the question though. Luckily her garage was well away from the cottage, partly hidden by a weeping willow.

His Jaguar was blocked by her shiny little Fiat. Cartaret smirked, congratulating himself on the foresight of filching Olga's car keys from the copper bowl of oddments on the hall stand. He put on the Fiat as much as entered it, coasted silently down the drive to the lane, and drove off when safely beyond earshot.

Twentiacre, when he reached it, was rather too much the Picturesque English Village. Cartaret felt vaguely surprised at not being charged an entry fee. He parked beside the village green outside a Georgian row of shops, bow windows with an abundance of bottle-glass panes making it hard to discern what they offered.

Helpfully, each shop had a sign suspended over its door, in the manner of an old inn. "Very twee," Cartaret grunted sourly, extricating himself from Olga's car.

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Studying the row of signs, he blinked and frowned, driven to use the horn-rimmed spectacles that vanity kept in his top pocket instead of balanced on his squashy nose.

Second on the left, she'd said. And though she was a flirt and a tease, she wasn't a fool. As owner of a computer-leasing firm and designer of its accompanying programs, Olga said what she meant—when giving directions anyway.

The sign over the second shop from the left announced, in weathered gilt Gothic lettering: CURIOS *** OBJETS D'ART. The first shop sold knitting wool and embroidery silk, the third purveyed tropical fish and their life-support systems. The fourth was a rare book dealer's. It occurred to Lionel Cartaret that if one relied on businesses in the village of Twentiacre, one would starve to death and perish of thirst.

Wheezing a little, he stared around.

There were no other shops, not even a pub. Evidently local people did their marketing at nearby larger townships such as Great Uprore or Lesser Dinne.

He stared at what was supposed to be the butcher's shop, and it was still an antique dealer's. The proprietor had emerged and was staring back at Cartaret.

Slamming the car door pettishly, Cartaret went over to him. "I'm looking for the butcher's."

The man gave him a look mingling distaste and reproach. His features were well suited to that expression, being long and vaguely pinched, their lower third obscured and made mournful by whiskers of the kind leaving it open to question whether a Mexican-bandit moustache had spread beyond bounds or a beard had become mangy at the chin.

"Look no further, Squire. This is it." The man wasn't dressed like a butcher—he was wearing a decent suit, when tradition decreed a striped apron and straw hat—but he opened the door with a flourish and drew Cartaret in.

Lionel Cartaret was off balance from the start. In modern Britain, "Squire" is one of those ambiguous, treacherously jeering salutations, far less obsequious than its original meaning suggests. It is a term much in vogue among used-car dealers or shifty men who enter bars with too many wristwatches, sleeved forearms positively girded in the things, and proceed to sell them at suspicious prices.

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Cartaret liked to be called "sir" for short by tradesmen and menials. The fact that the butcher—if he was a butcher—was by way of being a gentleman only made it worse.

But at least, once inside, Cartaret found that it was indeed a butcher's. In contrast to the tourist-poster exterior, the shop was all wipe-down plastic and humming, glacial cabinets.

"Your sign's wrong," Cartaret snapped. "Silly and deceptive. It must lose you a lot of trade."

The butcher pondered that. "If there was a great deal of trade to be lost in the first place," he countered.

"T'cha," commented Cartaret, or something to that audible effect.

The butcher sighed deeply. "Just because I sell chunks of dead organic matter—I never asked to inherit the family business—need my premises emblazon the unhappy fact? I'm a vegetarian in fact." He tapped his hollow chest, fiercely. "In here, where it matters, I'm an antique dealer. Something of a connoisseur, actually. I'm reluctant to sell my finer pieces, even at a handsome profit."

Following the languid wave of a long-fingered hand, Lionel Cartaret looked at a vast, glass-domed heap of sausages, livid and complex, that had disturbing suggestions of autopsies.

"Don't take everything literally," the butcher told him impatiently. "I *would* be reluctant, that is to say, if I were an antique dealer instead of—" He trailed off, sighing once more.

Drunk or deranged, Cartaret concluded. Not the most reassuring company in this place of dangling, quartered corpses, gleaming cleavers, huge knives that could cut like—well, a knife.

"Two steaks," he ordered briskly, avoiding the other man's eyes.

"I can't help you." Having made this manifestly untrue statement, the butcher folded his arms. "My name is Odo Fitzhugh," he added for no apparent reason. "Or, rather, it ought to be, since that's the name I like. An accident of birth condemned me to be the only son of George and Minnie Bull. But, as you'll be the first to understand, I refuse to go through life as Mr. Bull the butcher."

"Look here, just give me two steaks, please. You're a butcher and I want steaks—two steaks." Cartaret cleared his throat, aware that his voice had developed an undignified squeak. He was sweating.

"I can't *help* you." Fitzhugh was pettish now. "I only trade in the beastly stuff. I don't know the *names*. A chap comes in first thing every

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morning, brings—the material—from the meat market in London, and sets it out."

Moving behind the counter, he went on, "Unless you can point out exactly what you want, I'm helpless. This red stuff with the yellowy outside—ugh—is £1.90 a pound; the mauve-grey is £2.35, and the thin bits with all the veiny material is only 75 pence, it says here. Veiny seems the best buy. You can have pounds and pounds of the muck and still get change from a ten-pound note."

Odo Fitzhugh stepped back and spread his hands and nodded several times with the air of one who had done as much as can be expected of a reasonable man. No stranger to rage, but suffering the misfortune of being a terrible coward and thus unable to vent it, Lionel Cartaret wanted to stamp his foot and storm out. But, no, the buffoon was mocking him. He'd *force* him to cooperate.

"Sell me two steaks at once. No fancy talk, or I'll report you to the Chamber of Trade and—" Cartaret botched through his mental filing cabinets and managed, "And other competent authorities. I'm not without influence, and I'll make it my business to put you out of business."

"Such a fuss," Fitzhugh murmured, but he stirred himself.

"You're mad!" Cartaret accused, his face swollen with anger and victory.

"At least I'm not a carnivore." Fitzhugh, wincing visibly, snatched up a leg of lamb and dropped it on the scales. "That will be £4.75, sir."

"I asked for steak!" roared Cartaret, starting to vibrate with fury.

"Oh, God, then I'll have to touch it again to put it back." Fitzhugh wrung his hands. "All right, show me the steak if you're so clever."

"There, there, *there!* Right beside you! The big piece of meat. No, the other one—shaped like Gibraltar, damn you!"

Fitzhugh cowered a little. "But that must weigh—oh, a huge amount. It'll cost you a fortune."

"You cut it! You cut off—um—slices. You know, steaks. About two inches—no, *three* inches thick."

"I suppose you wouldn't care to have a shot at it?"

"Certainly not! *You* do it. With the knife there."

Fitzhugh, limply defeated, took up the knife and carved two steaks, head averted, uttering muffled, shuddering cries as he hacked.

At last the meat was wrapped, and that was when Lionel Cartaret made a tactical error. The steaks were surprisingly cheap, and he gave the butcher a twenty-pound note.

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He was in Fitzhugh's power again.

Fitzhugh posed in front of the till like a concert pianist confronting the opening bars of a work so exquisite, so demanding, that he is reluctant to unleash the first note.

"What brings you to our pleasant little parish, my dear sir?"

"None of your infernal business." Cartaret, steaks in hand, a clammy, oozing prize of war, felt more bold.

Fitzhugh simpered at him. "It's just that you're a stranger, you see. Visiting, perhaps?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I'm staying the weekend. No, I've never been here before. I agree the weather's fine. Now give me the blasted change."

Ignoring the demand, the butcher rolled the twenty-pound note, examined it closely, held it to his ear in the manner of an ignorant person testing a Havana cigar. "You strike me, sir, as a man with a firm sense of personal identity."

"What the hell are you blathering about now? Listen, if you don't give me that change instantly, I'll call the police." Cartaret glanced at his watch. He had wasted nearly an hour, having taken two wrong turnings on the way to Twentiacre because he had been driving, while Olga had strongly—indeed dictatorially—recommended he walk there by way of a bridle path.

It was an absurd, demeaning predicament. If he didn't get back soon she might miss her car. He knew Olga doted on the Fiat and would undoubtedly have refused to let him borrow it. There wasn't time to bother with the police—who, in any case, would snigger at him behind official masks of gravity.

By the same token, Cartaret was rather well off, mainly as a result of being extremely mean, and he had no intention of losing more than ten pounds for the sake of escape. Damn Fitzhugh and—yes, damn Olga, with her teasing ways and her locked bedroom door.

Fitzhugh smiled patronizingly. "Personal identity—you're very much into it, aren't you? That and labels. I'm a butcher, that's my label, so I have to *like* selling meat, be knowledgeable about it, revel in my expertise.

"But it's all terribly tenuous, my dear sir. Tenuous, shifting, vulnerable. I could take your place, you could stay here in the shop, and everything would still roll along smoothly."

Lionel Cartaret goggled at him, his fingers twitching. "Yes, absolutely

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right, I never thought of it like that." Steady, he thought. Lunatics should be soothed, but not courted so unctuously.

Fitzhugh sneered at him, recognizing the artifice. "You don't believe me."

"All right. It's an absurd suggestion. Luna—hrrmm—ludicrous. You're saying we could change places and nobody would notice?" Contemplating his five City directorships, his respectful staff, Cartaret couldn't help smirking. "There's a bit of a difference between us, after all."

"You're fat, I'm thin, and I've got more hair," Fitzhugh said. "Merest details—bagatelles."

Cartaret's temper snapped again. "Bloody fool! How could you become me—even for an hour? You don't know who I am or where I'm staying. You'd be lost from the word go!"

The butcher extracted a most unbutcherlike crocodile-skin billfold and produced a sheaf of money. "Five hundred pounds says I can do it for the rest of the day. I bet you."

Avarice, wounded dignity, and contempt melted together to give Lionel Cartaret a more potent high than cocaine. An imbecile's cash was as good as anyone's. "You're on!" he cried.

Fitzhugh nodded cheerily, they shook hands, and he made the till chime. "Your change, sir. No—leave by the other door, if you please. I'm closing the shop now."

Only when the door had slammed behind him with a snap of the lock did Cartaret realize he was facing a blank wall in semi-darkness. The lunatic's voice penetrated that panic-inducing, solid door.

"Fair's fair, old boy. How can I win my wager if you're following me to put your spoke in? You're in the washroom, so there's somewhere to sit down, and plenty of water in the tap.

"Ideal for rest and meditation—a retreat for a busy man of affairs like yourself. I'm going to be you for the rest of the day, right? Which we'll take to mean until sunset."

"Let me out, you clown!" Cartaret bellowed.

But the butcher had departed.

Olga smiled at her guest. "Did you enjoy the walk up from the village?"

Fitzhugh sipped dry sherry, openly appreciating her figure. Avoiding a direct lie, for he had driven back in her Fiat—Cartaret had left the keys in the ignition—he said, "The bridle path's a picture in summer."

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She was on edge, he fancied, striving for conversation. "Er—how's your latest shop, Odo? I thought you concentrated on supermarket-style places."

"So we do. But it seemed a bit of a lark, opening one in the village. I've got a good manager and there's a lot of money in Twentiacre for the gourmet end of the market." For a moment he was very much the keen businessman and hereditary master butcher.

Olga giggled. "I've noticed the old sign's still up, Odo. Don't you get people coming in expecting antiques?"

"It happens," Fitzhugh agreed carefully. "The shopfitters couldn't do much about the frontage, because of all the planning regulations and Best-Kept-Village nonsense. I'm still waiting for the sign painter to alter that board."

Olga looked at her watch and frowned. "The shop is open on Saturday mornings? I sent somebody to buy steaks. They've been gone ages—it's well past lunchtime."

"Normally we do. But the manager's wife was ill today, so he couldn't come in. I looked in for a while, then closed up."

"It's been a long time since you've been behind the counter," she teased, with a hint of admiration. Fitzhugh was one of her richest as well as most eccentric friends.

"It has its rewards," he replied. "You sent someone for steaks? A strange coincidence, darling. I happened to put a couple of prime ones in your kitchen as I came by—the window was wide open."

Eyes sparkling, she moistened mulberry lips. "Now why would you do that, Fitzie?" She managed to profile like a pouter pigeon while reaching to the cigarette box.

"I thought we might have a barbecue. Afterwards. Like we always did." He strolled to the latticed window, perhaps to get a closer view of the roses dropping there, stunned by the sun, heavy and opulent and as dizzyingly scented as Olga herself.

She slipped out from under his hand, smoothing the dress over her hips. "Not today, Fitzie, if ever. I have a guest and he'll be back soon. I did warn you last month. I'm not getting any younger. Slap and tickle's lovely, but a wedding ring is lovelier."

Nagging, Fitzhugh reflected, did not suit Olga. Teasing, yes; whining, no. "Marriage is an institution, and who wants to live in one of those places?"

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"You belong in an institution—you and your tired old jokes," she countered. But she couldn't stay angry with him. "You'd better toddle off now, dear. Lionel's well overdue, and I'd rather you didn't meet under my roof. He's a wee bit stuffy."

Fitzhugh inquired lazily, "Lionel wouldn't happen to be a portly gent with a fine head of skin, driving a new Jaguar?".

Olga was taken aback. "Why, yes. I mean—that's a spiteful portrait, but it could fit. Have you seen him?"

"Indeed I did, briefly. I was locking the shop when he roared up and asked me the quickest way to London," Fitzhugh told her innocently.

Going pale, Olga whisked to the window and peered out, her fingers beating an irritable tattoo on the sill.

"His car isn't there, if that's what you're trying to establish." Fitzhugh examined his nails. "I told you—he was in it when I saw him, and he went to London. Well, go out and check if you like. There's just your fancy Italian roller skate—you can see it past the willow."

She stubbed out her cigarette. "Bloody rudeness! He can't have just—Why would he? But the car's gone, you say?"

"On my word of honor." Fitzhugh spoke with ringing sincerity. After all, he had spent a careful ten minutes with a straightened-out wire coat hanger opening the driver's-side window of Lionel Cartaret's Jaguar before reaching through, releasing the handbrake, and pushing the car out of sight down the drive.

He twinkled at Olga. "Strange things happen to fat little men when they reach middle age."

"Something'll happen to him, all right, when I catch up with him!" Olga sat down in a temper, then shot Fitzhugh a suspicious glance. "Is this one of your gags?"

The butcher looked hurt. "Have a heart, darling. How could I pull anything? All I did was exchange a few words with a stranger who happened to be driving your caliber of car."

Fitzhugh discreetly refrained from telling her about spotting Cartaret in her car and putting two and two together. She'd been threatening to dump him for a better prospect, and one glimpse of podgy old Cartaret in the Fiat had proven the threat to be genuine.

"It was a lucky guess," he lied, "asking if the disappointed seducer in the Jag and Lionel were one and the same. Silly name, Lionel. Not half as nice as Odo."

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"*What d'you mean, disappointed seducer?*" Her eyes were glittering once more, not in the least coquettishly.

"I'd rather not go into it." Fitzhugh grew sheepish. "All right—he was frothing a bit, your Lionel. In a terrible hurry about making tracks back to London. Said he'd wasted a lot of time on a bird who promised all the delights of Paradise and never actually—dear me, this *is* embarrassing —delivered."

Olga pounced on the telephone, quivering with anger.

"He won't get there for hours," Fitzhugh warned.

Pulling herself together, though her nostrils were white, Olga said tightly, "Are you sure this isn't one of your jokes? You'd love to get me into bed so that Lionel would walk in on us."

"He won't be doing that." Fitzhugh's confidence was total. His tone changed. "By happy chance, is any of that Dom Perignon left that I gave you for your birthday?"

"A bottle or three." Olga wagged a finger. "We'll have a little, but no silliness, mind."

He kissed her neck after the first chilled glass.

"Not much silliness," she conceded.

Later, "Bass the pottle, Fitzhy. And don't think I don't—don't think I don't know what you're up to. Shame on you, lying me with pliquor. Won't work, 'cause I'm not in the least in-tixy-cated."

"Perish the thought." Fond of her as he was, Fitzhugh retained a sardonic strand in his dealings with Mrs. Delisle. "You're never more intoxicated than you want to be, bless you. I say, you've never shown me those new curtains you bought for the bedroom."

The washroom, while larger than most—an old storeroom really, with the hand basin and taps, electric hand dryer, and other facilities in a freshly tiled corner—encouraged Lionel Cartaret's incipient claustrophobia.

He paced and cursed, blasphemed and paced some more. He seemed to have been there for an eternity instead of only three hours.

Decorater's dust sheets were piled against one wall along with old paint cans and the ruin of a workbench. His heart had leaped on discovering a rusty screwdriver forgotten under the bench, a massive tool meant for titanic screws. Since the door hinges were on the far side, safe from attack, and Cartaret was no lock-picker, his find did him little good.

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After scratching the lock and bending the screwdriver in trying to lever the door open, he had stabbed the wall repeatedly, cowardice washed away in anger reddening his vision. Now, however, his shirt a sweaty rag, his feet aching, Lionel Cartaret had fallen into a mood of sullen, paradoxically impatient patience.

Sooner or later Fitzhugh must return and admit defeat. And Cartaret would be £500 richer.

He scowled and kicked the door and then, his toes hurting, wished he hadn't. What on earth would he tell Olga? By now she must realize that he'd taken her car and she would be displeased. It might be worse than that. She could have assumed it had been stolen and reported the loss to the police.

He clenched the screwdriver handle. The money wouldn't make up for everything. Odo Fitzhugh—Butcher Bull—whatever the fool's name was—had much to answer for.

Olga stretched and yawned, still half asleep. Up on one elbow beside her, Fitzhugh thought—not for the first time, for he was an accustomed witness of her awakenings—that she had something of the seal about her. The same glossy, plump, yet gleamingly graceful, fluid nakedness.

"What's the time, Fitzie?"

He squinted out the window, too idle to find his watch. "Must be seven o'clock or so—the sun's going down—Lord, it's *late!*" And he bounded out of bed.

"You're not *going?*" Her dismay was good for Odo Fitzhugh's ego.

"Not on your life. But I must pop out on a swift errand of mercy." He hesitated, smiling wickedly. "Olga, may I use your phone?"

"On the window sill." Olga shut her eyes, drowsily aware of Fitzhugh dialing a number and murmuring into the receiver.

Generating a not unwelcome chill, for the washroom had grown stuffier, the stone tiles hurt Cartaret's ample rump. He had grown tired of tiger-prowling his cage and sat, sacklike and dismal, his back to the wall.

He heard a phone pealing somewhere out in the closed shop. So near and yet so far. Lionel Cartaret's mind was not too original.

Then he cocked his head. Did he have enough air? Was he beginning to black out? His heart palpitated. Without a doubt, the distant ringing of the phone was coming to him in a subtly distorted fashion.

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He started up, tearing at the paint-spattered sheets, sneezing violently in the dust he was raising. And there it was, a black telephone that had been hidden underneath them.

A *ringing* telephone.

"Good man, you've found the old extension." Fitzhugh sounded jaunty and amused.

"You bastard!"

"Steady on, old chap. Mind your manners or I'll hang up. I only gave you a tinkle out of the goodness of my heart—there's an hour to go before sundown. I've won our bet, incidentally."

Cartaret made to dash the phone against the wall. "Like hell you have! You're sitting in some—some—some beerhouse or other, telling me lies. I'll never pay, d'you hear? Come and let me out!"

Unruffled, Fitzhugh purred, "Not a beerhouse, my dear fellow, a boudoir. You were staying with a lady, remember? And I returned in your stead. Reaping the benefits of—well, we won't go into that. Gentlemen don't tell."

Mastering his fury for the money resting on this, Cartaret said, "Anyone can spin a yarn, Fitzhugh. You don't even know Ol— You don't even know the name of my hostess."

"Goodness me, you're a fighter. Mrs. Olga Delisle, Cherry Blossom Cottage, Galleon Lane, Twentiacre."

When Cartaret's voice and vision returned, he said, "You could have nosed out her name and address somehow. It proves nothing."

At the other end, Fitzhugh covered the receiver. "Olga? Wake up, darling. The most extraordinary thing's happened. I picked up the phone to make a local call, and lo and behold your missing Lionel came on, asking for you. Crossed line, I suppose—post office telephones work in a mysterious way their wonders to perform."

"What do you want?"

Cartaret gaped as Olga's voice drilled into his ear, vowels icy, consonants furred with frost.

"Olga? Thank God! Send somebody to get me out, that maniac's locked me up for hours and—"

She didn't listen. "I've never been treated in such a wantonly boorish way. Never! How dare you!"

"It's not my fault. I took your car to fetch the steaks and—"

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"My car's outside the garage. I can see it from here. Are you drunk or what? That's the feeblest excuse for an excuse I've ever heard."

"Let me get a word in edgeways, you silly bitch!" Cartaret, foolishly, took a deep breath.

"How charming of you," Olga snarled, and hung up on him.

It was only when he had been smashing the phone on the floor for a minute that Lionel Cartaret thought of dialing the police. By then, it didn't work.

He felt very strange indeed. A long way off from his own body, and slightly above it. And deathly cold—a piece of machinery.

He'd make the pair of them pay for it. Somehow Fitzhugh had found Olga and wormed his way into her arms. They'd been sharing the same phone.

Cartaret could see them in his head. Entwined, helpless with evil, lubricious amusement. She'd been so distant with him with that locked bedroom door, and then the first stranger to pass by—a lunatic stranger with ridiculous whiskers, at that—

A voice whispered from part of his mind that, whiskers or no, the maniac had harvested Olga Delisle like a ripe plum. Envy, claustrophobia, and imprisonment are a volatile mix. Saliva dripped from Lionel Cartaret's chin. He wiped his hands on his trousers and took a fresh grip on the screwdriver.

All he had to do was wait.

Olga bit her lip, but the giggle squeezed past the obstruction even as she flushed crimson. "Fitzie, you didn't!"

Fitzhugh knotted his tie. "Well, he was such a pompous little twit. No sense of humor at all. I decided in a flash that you'd be wasted on him."

Olga swung her superb legs out of bed. "It's not that funny, you lunatic. My firm does useful business with Lionel."

"You're beautiful when you're angry."

Olga moaned in exasperation, slapping him hard. "I said it wasn't funny." Her hair tangled, her bare feet thrust into sandals, she pushed past him.

Cartaret heard the lament of abused tires, a car door slam like a drum—then, nearer, an urgent beat of feet, a flurried matching of key to lock.

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He crouched, waiting for a long, widening slot of light to trigger him. The door opened. "Fitzhu-u-ugh!" Lionel Cartaret hooted, and catapulted at his liberator, screwdriver held high.

His target was several miles away at that instant, drinking a vodkatini and wryly toasting Olga's charms and Cartaret's gullibility. She had dashed off in her Fiat, Fitzhugh's Rolls was parked near the village green, and he didn't have the keys to the Jaguar.

Lionel Cartaret was found unfit to plead by reason of insanity, so the subsequent murder trial was brief and relatively uninformative. Even so, the slaying of Mrs. Delisle made succulent scandal in the village.

Odo Fitzhugh did not contribute to it. It was bad enough, he confided to the neighbors, a homicidal maniac getting himself shut up in a Jolly Bull The Butcher emporium. But killing a dashed handsome woman who was also a jolly good bridge player—that was beyond a joke.

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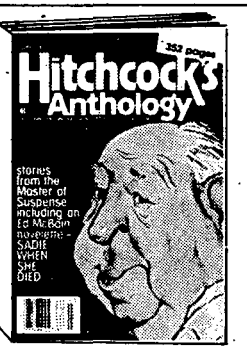
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The suspect had sent the police an advance warning on each of the bombings . . .

THE TIP OFFS

by JOHN H. DIRCKX

About a year and a half ago, anybody who could read a newspaper or turn on a radio or a TV set knew pretty much all there was to know about the series of fire bombings in deserted buildings in the Monroe district. What the public didn't know—because the media didn't know it either at the time—was that the police had been tipped off before each bombing, and had had time to check out the buildings and make sure nobody was in them when the bombs went off.

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They tried to find the bombs too, but they never quite managed that. Each bomb was hidden in a wall cavity near a panel giving access to plumbing or wiring. Battery-powered and triggered by radio signals, they spewed out flaming globs of plastic jelly that burned holes through everything except poured concrete and structural steel. The warnings to the police came by mail, typed on narrow strips of paper—but I'm getting ahead of the story.

If the piano-tuning business hadn't been going through one of its periodic slumps at the time, I probably never would have gone within a thousand yards of a fruitcake who got his jollies burning down condemned rooming houses and abandoned churches. Detective Sergeant Thorn, a guy I went to high school with, found me in the garage puttering around with an old square piano I'd been trying to rebuild in my spare time for the past three years.

"Got a minute to talk, John?"

"All day. It looks like everybody in the county who owns a piano is either in jail or on strike."

"Too bad they're not on welfare. They'd have piano stamps."

"Pull up a sawhorse. Am I in trouble?"

"Not yet. Have you been reading about these fire bombings?"

"Sure."

"Want to help us get him?"

I put down my electric glue pot and took a good look at him through the tops of my bifocals while I wiped my hands on a wet rag. "I don't know. What's the pitch?"

Thorn lit a cigarette and started pacing between the piano and the workbench. "We know who the guy is but we can't touch him without hard evidence."

"If you haven't got evidence, how do you know who he is?"

"We're ninety percent sure. All the bombed buildings so far have been properties owned by a real-estate conglomerate called Porch Enterprises. Our suspect's mother died in a nursing-home fire last year. The nursing home was an old death trap leased from Porch Enterprises. He took Porch and the management of the nursing home to court for negligence, but the judge threw the case out for lack of evidence, and appeal was denied. He's been flooding the papers with letters and he's called the local radio talk shows so many times they won't let him on the air any more."

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I unplugged the glue pot and started cutting out another corner brace with a coping saw. "It sounds like a pretty flimsy case to me. Have you been having him followed?"

"Big waste of manpower so far. The guy really gets around. He's a driver-courier for a parcel-delivery service. Hell, he could have fifty bombs planted somewhere. All he has to do to set one off is turn on his ham-radio outfit and punch out the right signal."

"Can't you just lock him up for a few weeks and see if the bombs stop going off?"

Thorn threw me a sour smile laced with mock pity. "You're living in the past, John. The only laws the judges know about nowadays are the ones that keep the hooligans on the streets. We can't touch this creep without sticking our own fingers in a rat trap."

"O.K. So where do I fit in?"

"Are you still doing player-piano work?"

"Sometimes. Not lately. It's a bum racket. People think a player piano ought to pump as easily now as it did when they used to play it in grandma's back parlor. I can recover a bellows and grease up a pedal linkage, but I can't make the customer's legs fifty years younger. And nobody ever wants to pay a fair price for a first-class rebuilding job."

"That wouldn't be any problem."

"What wouldn't be any problem?"

"We'd guarantee you'd get your price."

I laid down my saw and turned around to face him. "Are we still talking about the same thing?"

"Our fire bomber has a player piano that doesn't work. You want to fix it—payment guaranteed?"

"What's the catch?"

Thorn threw his cigarette out into the driveway and hunched down on his sawhorse. "Look, John, we've got to get a break on this, or it's going to get a lot worse. It's only a matter of time until he blows up a couple of dozen people. The newspapers are eating us alive, the City Council is ready to can every cop on the squad. If you could spend some time around his place with your eyes and ears open, you might just pick up something that would give us a winning edge."

"How do I get in? Door-to-door tuners went out during World War II."

"He lives in March Hills. They've got a little village newspaper over

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there, mostly local advertising. You run an ad in that—free estimates on player-piano repair, fifty-percent discount on all player-piano work—whatever will get him to call. Then you turn down all comers except him."

"In that case, you pay for the ad. What's his name?"

"Are you in?"

"I guess so."

"His name is Franklin Dance. Age thirty-two, single, lives with his father. Electronics technician, laid off from a government job about a year ago. This is top secret, John: he's mailed us an advance warning about each of the five bombs so far. Here's a composite photocopy of the warnings."

They were all one-liners, each typed on a narrow strip of paper. For example: BIG BANG TODAY AT HAUSFELD APARTMENTS, 386 CROFT STREET. One was a pun: HOT TIME AT THE OLD TOWNE, 44 BECK PLAZA. The Towne was an abandoned theater.

"All slum addresses, all vacant—so far. But even a firebug makes a mistake sooner or later and fries somebody."

"Do you think he stays and watches these places burn?"

"Not the last two anyway. He was at home when both of them broke out, and he stayed there." He pulled a paper out of his notebook and unfolded it. "Here's a sample ad we put together at Headquarters."

It took us five weeks to hook our fish. My wife Beth, who answers my business phone and books appointments, had taken about a dozen calls in response to Thorn's ads in the *March Hills Trader*. Since business was still pretty slack, I followed up several of the calls. Meanwhile, two more bombs went off and the second one cost a policeman an eye. By the time Dance called for an estimate on rebuilding his player piano, I was ready to rebuild *him* with a hacksaw.

I went out late on a Saturday morning because he said he was tied up during the week. His father let me in—a gaunt, silent figure who vanished when Dance came out of the kitchen with a coffee cup in his hand.

"Piano guy? Right through here." He was short and prematurely bald, with a Porky Pig face and a cigarette cough, and his voice had a kind of shrewish whine. It was easy to believe he could hand a twenty-seven-year-old cop an eyepatch and a lifetime behind a desk without losing any sleep over it.

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He led me down the basement stairs, past a small workshop and a ping-pong table, and turned on a bare lightbulb over the piano. I had to move three or four dozen mildewy rolls off the top so I could get a look inside. One glance told me that nothing short of a major rebuilding job would get the player mechanism working.

"It's in pretty bad shape," I said for openers, trying not to sound too pessimistic. "All this rubber tubing has to be replaced. You can see it's just like chewing gum. I can't get at the pneumatics without taking this thing off, but it's a fair bet they'll need recovering." He stood around slurping coffee and coughing while I unscrewed the pneumatic stack and lifted it out.

We dickered for a long time. When I finally got out my tablet and wrote up the estimate, it was for a ridiculously low figure.

My usual practice would have been to lug the stack home in the trunk of my car and do most of the rebuilding in my shop. But since I'd promised Thorn I'd spend as much time as I could at Dance's place I carried in my tool chest and a carton of materials and set up operations on the ping-pong table.

Rebuilding a player is a long job in any case, but I was ready to make this one last for months if it took that long to get the goods on Dance. Though only about a third of the striking pneumatics needed recovering, I stripped them all. It gave me a charge to think that Dance was getting ripped off under police auspices—and maybe, in the end, at police expense.

I made a lot of unnecessary trips to the car because I wanted to see as much of the house as I could. I also spent a lot of time wetting rags at the laundry tubs so I could study the workshop. If Dance made his bombs there, he must have brought in other tools and equipment, because there was nothing there but a cupboard full of paint cans and a pile of rusty hand tools.

That night I called Thorn to report that so far I was into him for twenty-six dollars and that I hadn't found out anything about Dance except that he and his father didn't seem to be on speaking terms.

I wasn't due to go back until the next weekend.

By that time the bomber had brought down the roof of a church, destroying a big stockpile of Civil Defense supplies. As usual, the warning

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had arrived at Police Headquarters an hour or two before the explosion, in the morning mail—just a narrow strip of paper in a plain envelope, message and address both typed, no fingerprints.

On my second Saturday afternoon at Dance's I made about as much progress on the player piano as if I'd been paralyzed from the ears down. Late in the afternoon, as I was going out to get a roll of felt from the car, I got lucky. A door in the hall that had always been closed before was standing wide open and I got a good look at Dance's short-wave radio outfit. I also saw what looked like a pretty fancy electronics lab.

Thorn really ate that up. He even came over to see me on Sunday afternoon.

"Do you think you can use this?" he asked, showing me a miniature camera.

"Where does the flashbulb go?"

"John, this is a four-hundred-dollar instrument. If you can see something, this baby can see it better. Get me some shots of that electronic gear, will you? And if you can find a typewriter anywhere in the house, take a couple of pictures of that too. Just don't get caught."

I took the camera from him and focused it experimentally on my shoe.

"I'll have to ask you to sign a receipt for that, John."

The big break happened the following Saturday. Dance came into the basement in the middle of the afternoon and said he and his father had to go downtown for an hour or two—they wanted to be sure I'd lock up if I left before they got back. As soon as they drove away, I phoned Police Headquarters, figuring the best thing I could do would be to get Thorn and his people in there fast. But Thorn was out of the office and I didn't know who else knew what he and I were working on. So I just took the house apart by myself.

First I shot a roll of film in the electronics lab. Then I dug through drawers and cupboards and closets, one room after the other, until I started worrying about the Dances coming back. I found absolutely nothing, not even a typewriter. On a hunch I borrowed a trash bag from the kitchen and dumped the laboratory wastebasket into it. I was tucking it under the seat of my car when the Dances pulled into the driveway.

I knocked off early that evening and instead of going home for dinner I headed straight for Headquarters. The man at the desk told me Thorn had gone camping for the weekend.

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"You're kidding."

"No, sir. He'll be back Monday morning."

"Who can I talk to that works with him?"

"That'd be Inspector Burke. One flight up and through the glass doors to your left."

Burke played—or maybe was—very dumb. He took back the camera but he couldn't find my receipt, so he wrote out another one on the back of a blank arrest warrant. When I pulled out the plastic bag of trash from the lab he turned green.

"Get that stuff out of here!" he yelled, with a panicky glance into the empty corridor.

"It's just trash out of his workshop. Pieces of wire, scraps of tape—I thought maybe you could match them up with—"

"Look, just get out of here with it, O.K.? I never saw it, right? It's illegal to collect evidence like that without a warrant! That means you can't use it once you've got it, no matter what it is!"

I went home to dinner. Afterwards, I spread some newspapers on the kitchen table and emptied the bag of illegal evidence onto it. Blobs of solder, pieces of colored wire, curlicues of sheet metal, wads of plastic tape, a couple of cash-register tickets from a hardware store—and a narrow strip of white typing paper.

At first I thought it was blank, but then I saw a row of fuzzy grey marks along one edge. My heart slipped a couple of gears as I realized what those marks were. I got out my wife's portable typewriter, on which she's done my statements and appointment-reminder cards for the past eleven years, and sat down at the table with a writing tablet and the telephone book.

When I was in grade school I started reading Poe's "The Gold Bug" for a book report and got hooked on codes for life. I devoured manuals of cryptography, learned Morse, studied Egyptian hieroglyphics, and sent away box tops for a Lone Ranger Code Ring. When I saw the marks on that strip of paper I knew it was only a matter of time until I had Dance's next message.

If you don't feed the paper far enough into a typewriter for the rubber rollers to hold it down against the cylinder, you get a fuzzy little mark above each letter, where the top of the type hits the free edge of the paper. Above the letter a you get a mark made by the top of the capital A, and so forth. In typing his last message, Dance must have run the

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paper only a little way into the typewriter so that when he snipped away the top edge it contained a duplicate of the message, but in a kind of cipher.

By going through the alphabet on the typewriter, I found that the top edges of the type can make seven possible marks. Grouping capital letters according to the shapes of their tops, I worked up the following table:

1. A
2. B D P R
3. C G O Q S
4. E F T Z
5. H K M N U V X Y
6. I J L
7. W

No two vowels are in the same group. To offset that advantage, though, the two most common letters, **e** and **t**, leave the same mark. Most numerals make distinctive marks because their upper shift produces symbols or punctuation marks. You find no mark at all above a typed capital letter, or above the number **6**. Two blanks together usually mean a space followed by a capital letter.

First I took the part of the message that obviously contained the address and converted each mark to the corresponding group number in my table. Filling in the numeral 227 (" "&), substituting a's for the two Group 1 marks, and leaving blanks for the supposed capital letters, I got:

_32645 _355225 **227** _425a224 _3a2

The last set of marks pretty evidently represented the word "Road." From there on it was just a long series of trial substitutions, checked against the street directory in the phone book. My biggest obstacle was that the first letter of each word in the address, being a capital, had left no mark.

At ten o'clock I got up to ask Beth to turn down the TV. At one in the morning Beth got up to make me another pot of coffee. At three-thirty I called Police Headquarters.

"The next fire bomb is planted at the Worley Foundry, 227 Gerhardt Road. If there's no way you can get hold of Sergeant Thorn, tell Inspector Burke. Call him now. Have you got that address?"

"Who's calling, please?"

"Worley Foundry, 227 Gerhardt Road." I hung up.

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About noon, Thorn and Burke turned up at my place. I was still in my pajamas.

"We've got him, John."

"Who? Dance?"

"Right. We found his next bomb, two days ahead of schedule. Our people disarmed it and doped out the signal. When he tries to detonate it we'll have equipment set up that will identify the signal sequence and trace it to his transmitter. That's good evidence. Along with the other stuff we've got, it'll cook his goose."

"How'd you find the bomb?"

"An anonymous phone call."

"No kidding! Did those pictures I took help you any?"

"They're not back from the lab yet. Listen, we just wanted you to know you can get out of the player-piano business again, but don't do anything to tip him off, O.K.?"

"What about my bill?"

"We'll talk about that after we get Dance."

Thorn got Dance, all right—he handed the D.A. an airtight case. Dance finally admitted planting the bombs and sending the messages, which he'd typed on a demonstration typewriter in a department store. After he was tucked away in the cooler, I submitted my bill for $61.00 to the Police Department. At first Thorn tried to weasel out of paying. Then I showed him the little strip of paper and the seventeen pages of notes it had taken me to decipher it.

Now that he's convinced I was the anonymous caller, payment is a sure thing, but Thorn is so impressed I have a new worry: that he'll call on me next time he has a code to break. And the piano-tuning business is enough for me. I like the leisure—and I like my sleep.

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Christopher warned them it would be like "The Ransom of Red Chief" . . .

LOST CAUSES

BY A. E. SCHRAFF

The winter sky was dark-blue and the screams of seagulls filled the air. But the people in the battered camper heard another, more ominous sound.

"Was that somebody calling for help?" the young man asked his sister.

She sat beside him in the front seat, her brown eyes wide with fear. "Yes—I think it came from the water."

The camper turned off the highway onto the shoulder of the road and

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they parked. There was little traffic this morning because of the raw wind. The man jumped from the camper and surveyed the rocky coastline. He saw a head bobbing in the choppy green water—the swimmer was obviously in trouble. Sharks sometimes moved through the distant waters at this time of year; they could be out there now, concealed by the fog.

"I'm going down," the young man said. He kicked off his shoes when he reached the bottom of the narrow rocky path to the shallow rim of sand and plunged into the choppy surf.

He reached the swimmer in seconds. "Leg cramps?" he asked between gasps.

"Yeah," the swimmer answered. He was a kid about seventeen.

The young man hauled him back to the narrow beach. They both sat a while, catching their breath.

"You O.K. now?"

The boy spit out a little water and managed a weak smile. "Yeah, sure. Thanks!" He shook his head. "I got disoriented, forgot where the shore was. I was swimming in the wrong direction." He was still breathing hard and began shivering with the cold.

The young man's sister had reached the beach and stood there, noticing that there was something wrong with the swimmer's eyes. They were very blue and bright, but didn't focus properly.

"You're blind, aren't you?" the girl said.

He turned his head toward her. "Almost. I have about five percent vision—just colored blurs. Unfortunately, the ocean looked the same to me as the beach." He smiled wryly. "I guess you both think I'm crazy to be swimming alone on a day like this."

The young man shrugged and said, "We've got a camper parked up there. Why don't you come up and have some coffee? You look frozen."

"Thanks. It seems a lot colder now than it did when I went in."

The girl looked sharply at the swimmer. He was suntanned and trim, very handsome, and his black hair shone like a crow's wing. "How'd you get blind?"

"It's congenital."

"What's that?"

"I was born with the defect. It's been getting worse. In a few years I'll have no sight at all. It isn't as bad as if I'd had good vision and lost it," he added quickly.

They climbed to the camper and the girl gave the boy a blanket to

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wrap around his shoulders. "Coffee will be ready in a second," the man said.

"You're very kind. Do you live around here?"

The brother and sister exchanged an amused look. The man said, "This is a very expensive neighborhood, kid. We couldn't afford one of the roof tiles they got on these houses." He poured coffee. "Where do you come from?"

The boy laughed. "I'm afraid I *do* live around here."

The sister and brother looked at one another again. The camper was old and worth very little, and most of the clothes in the closet were stolen. The young man was only twenty-one but his police record dated back nine years. The girl was eighteen and just released by the California Youth Authority after a string of purse snatches.

"I'm Christopher Cain Blackwood." The boy introduced himself as he took a long swallow of coffee. "There's no way I can repay you for saving my life but if you'll drive me up Swallowtail Lane to my house, I'd like to write you guys a check for your trouble."

"Christopher Cain Blackwood," the young man repeated. "Is your father Carlton Blackwood?"

"Yes."

"He's been on the cover of *Time*—he's a big oil magnate or something, isn't he?"

"He's involved with several companies."

"How come you're swimming in the ocean with nobody around if you're—" the brother asked.

"My dad's in New York with my stepmother, and the servants sort of ignore me, thank God. I take a lot of long walks and long swims by myself." He smiled and finished his coffee. "How about you guys? What are your names?"

"My name's Jim and this is my sister Linda," the young man answered quickly.

"And you're bumming around the country in your camper?"

"Something like that."

"Well, saying thanks is pretty inadequate, but I do appreciate what you did. It'd make me feel better if you'd come back to the house. Maybe a couple thousand will buy you a few tanks of gas and some hamburgers on your travels."

Jim and his sister blinked. They had seven dollars in an empty coffee

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can and had never had more than fifty between them. And here was this kid offering to write a check for two thousand just like that.

Christopher's expression turned anxious. "Look, I don't want to cheapen what you did by offering you money, but it'd really make me happy to know that you had a little extra money to enjoy." Then he added, "Maybe you doubt I'm who I say I am. Look—" He reached for a gold medallion around his neck, unclasped it, and handed it to Jim.

Jim read the engraved message. *"To Christopher Cain Blackwood, my beautiful firstborn son."*

"Did your dad give you this?"

"My mother. She's been dead for years." He looked sad for a moment, then said, "Hey, here's another suggestion. You guys could come to the house and stay for a few days as my guests if you like it. We've got a heated pool and it's a pretty comfortable place."

A hardness came into Jim's eyes. "Do you always invite strangers into your house, Christopher?"

"I don't meet many."

"Don't you think it's stupid though? What if we stole the family silverware or something?"

Christopher laughed. "No—you're good people."

"How would you know?" Jim replied.

Uneasiness came into Christopher's voice. "Look, maybe I've offended you by offering you money. Maybe you hate rich people. But I swear I didn't mean to be arrogant—"

"You haven't offended anybody, Christopher—but you've made a big mistake. You should have kept your mouth shut about who you are, drunk your coffee, and said thanks and goodbye. You shouldn't have told us who you are."

Christopher was silent, but some of the color left his face.

Jim measured him with his eyes and determined he was only slightly smaller than himself. He opened the closet and found a bulky pullover sweater and a pair of jeans, woollen socks, and sneakers. He thrust the clothing at Christopher. "Put these on."

"I don't understand."

"Just do it."

Wordlessly, Christopher slipped the powder-blue sweater over his head and put on the jeans. Dressed, he looked even younger, and his uneasiness had turned to fear. When Jim told him to stand and move

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down the narrow aisle of the camper, some instinct told him to flee. He sensed where the door was and tried for it, but Jim pressed him against the closet door, saying, "In prison I was light-heavyweight champion."

"What do you want?" Christopher found the courage to ask.

Linda turned the upholstered dinette chairs into a bed. Jim pushed Christopher onto the bed, tied his ankles and wrists, then started to gag him.

"Please don't," Christopher gasped through a dry throat. "I swear I won't yell."

"O.K.," Jim said. "But if you make any trouble I'll—"

Linda went to the cab and started the engine, turning the radio on loud and letting the beat drown out the nausea she felt. They were heading for the mountains, where a friend let them use his cabin occasionally. It was high among the white pines and would be covered with snow at this time of year.

"You're going to hold me for ransom?" Christopher asked.

"You got it," Jim said.

"But *you saved my life!*"

"In prison I donated blood," Jim laughed.

"And if you don't get the money you'll—kill me?"

"I'm not going to do that."

"What were you in prison for?"

"Street fights—stealing."

"Look, I'll give you all the money I have in my checking account if you give this up."

"Knock it off, kid. You'd call the cops and you know it."

"I swear I wouldn't! I'd even give you my *Kandinsky*. It's worth a fortune but I hate it."

Jim laughed. "What's that?"

"A painting. I'll give it to you." He took a deep breath. "My father won't pay."

"Don't worry, he'll pay. I'll make some really gory threats."

"There's no law, you know, that says a father *has* to pay."

Jim thought briefly of his own father, who wouldn't have given a can of warm beer for either of his kids. But the rich were different. Rich people loved their children. Rich people ate at tables with candles and took home movies and played Santa Claus at Christmas time.

"When I was born, the doctors said I'd be retarded as well as blind.

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My father was an all-American athlete in college, Phi Beta Kappa. I was a bitter reproach to him and he wanted me put into an institution."

The camper began the climb into the Sierra Nevadas.

"You're his son."

"As a child I was clumsy, uncoordinated. My father said I *was* retarded. He and my mother quarrelled about it constantly. He told me a thousand times it'd have been better if I'd never been born. Why should he pay to recover a son he's always despised?"

"I don't want to hear any more of this phony garbage, Christopher."

Christopher could feel the camper taking the mountain curves. "Are you going to put me someplace and leave me?" He'd heard of such things—kidnap victims left in underground prisons through days of silent terror.

"No. We'll be at a cabin. It'll be like camping. A rich kid like you—you've been camping, haven't you?"

"No."

The camper ascended the mountain for the next hour and a half. The temperature dropped dramatically. Then, abruptly, they turned off the main road and bounced for a few miles until the vehicle jolted to a stop. When Linda opened the door a bitter gust of wind intruded.

Jim cut Christopher loose and shoved a fleece-lined leather jacket into his hands. "Put this on. It's from a very good shop in Hollywood."

When Christopher stepped outside, cold more bitter than any he'd ever felt rushed at his face, bringing a flush of color to his cheeks. He smelled the thick incense of pines and, with his first step, he realized there was snow underfoot. He had read descriptions of snow in Braille. White, glistening, icy—the poetry of slowly descending flakes on a black sky, trees with immaculate cotton shrouding their branches.

Impulsively, he stooped and closed his fingers around an icy handful. To his eyes it looked like a brilliant, glowing light.

"Haven't you ever been in snow before?" Linda asked.

"No." He plunged his hand into a drift and his fingers turned numb. He stood and looked around at the dark pyramid shapes of the surrounding mountains. The girl was a dark blur, her hair a light halo. "Are you blonde?"

"Sort of," she said self-consciously.

"You're a young girl. You shouldn't be mixed up in this."

"I've done plenty worse in my life than Jim," she said.

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The cabin was almost as cold inside as outside, but soon Jim had a fire going; Christopher could make out the bright glow when he was shoved into a chair near it.

"Want some hot chocolate?" Jim asked him.

"I guess so."

"I'll make some hamburgers too. I make great hamburgers, don't I, Linda?"

"Better than mine," she agreed.

The hot chocolate was thick and good, and in a few minutes the smell of sizzling hamburgers filled the cabin. But Christopher had told them about his father and they hadn't believed him, and the cold fear remained in the pit of his stomach.

His mother had died when he was six and he had been sent to a place in Arizona for severely retarded children. For a long time he believed he *was* incapable of learning. He stuttered helplessly over simple words and he couldn't grasp Braille. And then an alert, dedicated teacher had persevered and forced him to learn. There had seemed to be no warmth to her, but underneath her cool exterior she had obviously cared desperately. Now Christopher remembered her every year with an extravagant gift. She had been the only person to care about him besides his mother.

"I make this special filling, so my hamburgers aren't like at the fast-food places," Jim was saying. "I use horseradish and a special cheese-and-pickle relish."

"He could get rich in the hamburger business," Linda said.

Christopher put aside his painful memories. "Why don't you, then? Why kidnap people instead?"

"Watch it, Christopher."

"Why, are you sensitive about it? Don't you realize a kidnapper is the lowest kind of criminal?"

There was a long silence, then Jim forced a hamburger and a cup of coffee into his hands.

It *was* a fantastic hamburger, but Christopher was too angry to say so.

"Look, what are they going to think when you don't come home tonight?" Jim asked him as they ate.

"I've told you. My father's in New York."

"Yeah, but the servants."

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"Most of the time they don't know if I'm there or not."

"I don't believe that, Christopher. I figure they must keep pretty close tabs on you, and when you don't show back there tonight they're gonna sweat."

"Believe what you want."

"When is your father due home?"

"Friday—day after tomorrow."

"O.K., I'll call him then."

"He's got an unlisted phone number. You won't find it in the book."

"But surely you know it, don't you, Christopher?"

"Yeah—but I'm not going to tell you."

"Look, I'm trying to be decent to you, but that could change. If you found yourself in a snowdrift long enough I think you'd decide to give me that number."

"Did you ever read O. Henry?"

"Yeah. He was in jail; like me."

"Ever read 'The Ransom of Red Chief?' "

"The one where the kidnappers end up paying the father to take the rotten kid back? Yeah, but that was a story, Christopher, and this is for real. I can make some threats that'll chill your father's blood."

"That would be impossible. He's already got ice in his veins."

"Gee, I read he's a real charitable guy. Gives a fortune to good causes all the time."

"Yeah, but I'm not exactly his favorite charity."

"He wouldn't let his own son die." Jim drew closer. "Look, my old man was a dog. He beat me with his belt every other night. You want to tell me your father did that to you?"

"No—he never touched me."

"You see? He didn't knock you around. That means he cared."

"I mean he never *touched* me. Not once."

"He must have," Linda said in a strange voice.

"My mother would set me up: I'd bring him a little gift or learn some poem to please him and go to him in his big chair and stutter it out and he'd react like I was a cockroach that crawled out of the wall. One time I tried to crawl up on his lap and he dumped me off and said, "Don't *ever* do that again!' "

Jim unrolled sleeping bags on the floor and told Christopher to get in the one near the fire.

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"Don't try getting away," he told him, climbing into the one nearest the door, "because you'd stumble over me, and that would make me very mad, Christopher. You'd never get away with it and I *want* my sleep."

Christopher lay for a while, wide awake. He thought about his room at home. He'd never felt at home there.

"Are you homesick?" Linda whispered in the darkness.

Christopher turned his head a little and saw the light glow of her hair. "What do you look like?"

"Nothing. I look like nothing."

"What color are your eyes?"

She didn't answer right away. "A nothing color. What do you care?"

"I'm just curious."

From across the room, Jim said, "Shut up, Christopher. We want the big money. Stop trying to talk us out of it."

Christopher closed his eyes. It was strange being here. He had never slept in a room where other people slept. He had always been alone.

In a little while, he heard the girl's even breathing. Outside the cold wind whistled and he tried to picture large, graceful snowflakes blowing through the black night. He slept and dreamed strange, disconnected images.

The room was getting lighter. He smelled pancakes.

"Morning," Jim said to him. "It's my sister's turn to cook. Her pancakes are almost as good as my burgers."

Christopher washed in the small bathroom. When he came out, the pancakes were waiting, covered with maple syrup.

Linda said, "It snowed last night. You can see where some little animals walked on the fresh snow."

After breakfast, Jim said, "I'll need that phone number before tomorrow, you know."

"I'll lend you the money to open a hamburger stand of your own," Christopher offered.

"Give me the phone number, Christopher."

"I forgot it."

"I've got news for you. If you don't come up with that number you'll be sleeping in a snowdrift tonight."

At ten o'clock the sun came out. Christopher could see the sky was blue and the sun was shining.

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"Want to build a snowman?" Linda asked suddenly.

"Are you serious?"

"Sure—I haven't built one since I was thirteen. I was in a pretty good foster home in Colorado. I was living with a lady and her two kids. I thought she liked me, but then she called welfare to take me back. I don't know why."

Outside they rolled two large snowballs, putting the smaller one on top of the larger.

"Now what?"

"We find cinders for the eyes and twigs for the mouth," Linda said.

"Maybe it'll come alive and tell you what a fool you are, Linda."

Suddenly there was a rifle shot. Jim had been adjusting the chains on the camper's tires, and he came running. "What was that?"

"A hunter, I guess," Linda said. "It sounded close."

They could hear men crashing through the brush. Christopher wondered if he should shout for help. But then there might be shooting and somebody could get killed. The sounds grew dimmer as the men moved off in another direction.

Jim ran to the cabin, slammed inside and then out again.

"Where's he going?" Christopher asked.

"To shoot the deer."

"What deer? Why would he do that? You've got enough food, haven't you?"

"The deer is wounded. It came through the clearing with blood streaming from its side. It was awful."

"You saw it?"

"Yes—a doe. It's not legal to shoot a doe. She'll crawl away and die slowly. She won't know what's the matter with her. If Jim can follow the trail of her blood while it's fresh, he can end her pain." A rifle shot cracked in the icy air.

In about ten minutes, Jim returned. "She hadn't gone far."

"I've got to chop some wood," Jim said later.

"Can I help with that?" Christopher asked.

Jim paused. "Now, why should you want to do that?"

"I'll benefit from the heat as much as you will."

"O.K., you can carry them inside."

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Later, as Christopher stood while Jim piled logs in his arms, he said, "Did you come from a farm?"

"Yeah."

"Any good memories?"

"No—just being cold, hungry, and scared. Our old lady ran off when Linda and I were small, and that turned the old man even meaner than before. He'd lock me in the root cellar for practically no reason at all. The place was full of rats. I guess I hated him more than anybody I've ever known."

"You ever have a regular job?"

"A fry cook, once—but when they found out about my prison record they fired me."

"Would you like a place of your own?"

The chopping stopped. "Don't start that again."

They took the wood inside the cabin and hung up their coats.

After breakfast on Friday, Jim said, "Christopher, I'm driving down to the gas station now to make that call. I need that number now."

"Please don't do it," Christopher said.

"I've got to. I'm never going to get another chance like this."

Christopher gave him a number.

Jim backed him into a chair and tied his hands. "I won't be gone long. Maybe an hour." He went outside and Christopher heard the chains on the wheels as the camper drove away in the snow.

"It'll all be over soon," Linda said nervously.

Christopher remained silent.

Ten minutes later the sound of an engine on the highway reached the cabin. Linda went to the window. "It's a ranger!" she cried. "He's stopping! He's coming here! There are two of them—"

There was knocking on the door. "Open up!"

"Oh, my God!" Linda gasped.

"Linda, untie me quickly," Christopher said calmly.

"I can't! Oh, I can't!" Her voice was panic-stricken.

"They'll break in here and find me tied up and then they'll know," Christopher whispered. "Untie me, Linda—I won't give you away."

"Look, you people in there!" The ranger's voice was harsh. "Open up!"

Christopher shouted, "O.K., O.K!" Linda frantically cut the ropes with a kitchen knife. "Rumple your hair!" Christopher whispered.

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She obeyed numbly and went to open the door. The two rangers looked the young couple over, and one of them tried to hide a smile. "Hope we didn't interrupt anything."

Christopher managed a grin. "That's O.K."

"Somebody shot a deer," the older of the two rangers said. "A doe with a fawn. That's illegal. What do you know about it?"

Christopher spoke up quickly.

"It happened yesterday. A bunch of hunters came through here, firing away, and the doe was badly wounded. My—brother—saw her and went after her to put her out of her misery."

"We wondered about that. She was shot in the side and in the head. Your brother's a good shot. Is he here? We'd like a word with him."

"He's gone down to the gas station."

"Well, we'll just wait, then. That coffee sure smells good."

Linda trembled as she poured coffee for the two men. "Much obliged, Miss," the older one said. He turned to Christopher. "Are you blind, son?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

They heard the camper arriving. Linda said, "There's Jim now." She ran out the front door toward the camper. The engine was still running.

"What's the matter? What happened?" Jim shouted, his eyes wild. He'd seen the ranger's pickup.

"They came about the doe you shot. She had a fawn and they wanted to know who killed her." Tears ran down the girl's face. "It's O.K.! Christopher didn't say anything. I cut him loose before they saw him and he's pretending nothing's wrong."

Jim turned off the engine.

Linda sobbed. "I wish you hadn't made that call!"

Jim grabbed her. "Stop crying, will you? I didn't get to make the call. You know what number that punk gave me? The Los Angeles City Zoo! I was coming back here to break his neck!"

Linda trailed him into the cabin. "Do you want to see the gun?" he asked the troopers. "The doe was gut-shot and in agony."

They examined the rifle and seemed satisfied.

The older of the two said, "You did the right thing."

The other said, "Some of these hunters can't see straight. They shoot

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telegraph poles, each other—half kill the poor beasts. I'm glad you kids seem to know what you're doing."

When they had driven away Jim said, "Why didn't you tell them?"

"I told you I wouldn't," Christopher reminded him.

"Things are fine at the zoo."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"You took a big chance," Jim said. "What did you think I'd do when I came back after being connected with the monkey house? What made you think *you* could turn me around when nobody else has ever succeeded in doing that?"

Christopher shrugged. "Your compassion."

"And now you think because you've covered for us I haven't the heart to go on with this. That's what you think, isn't it?"

"Yes," Christopher said.

After a silence Jim said, "I'll drive you home."

Christopher said, "I thought we could look at hamburger stands."

"I've got no money for a hamburger stand, kid."

"I have."

"I won't take your money."

"I'm not giving it to you. We'll be partners, fifty-fifty. I've been looking for an investment."

"Forget it," Jim told him. "Linda and me, we're lost causes."

Christopher smiled. "Yeah, I know. That's what makes it so fitting. I'm a lost cause too."

Jim looked at his sister.

"We could do it—*we could!*" she said eagerly.

Jim laughed softly, reached out with both arms and embraced her and the boy. "Then we will," he agreed, "we will!"

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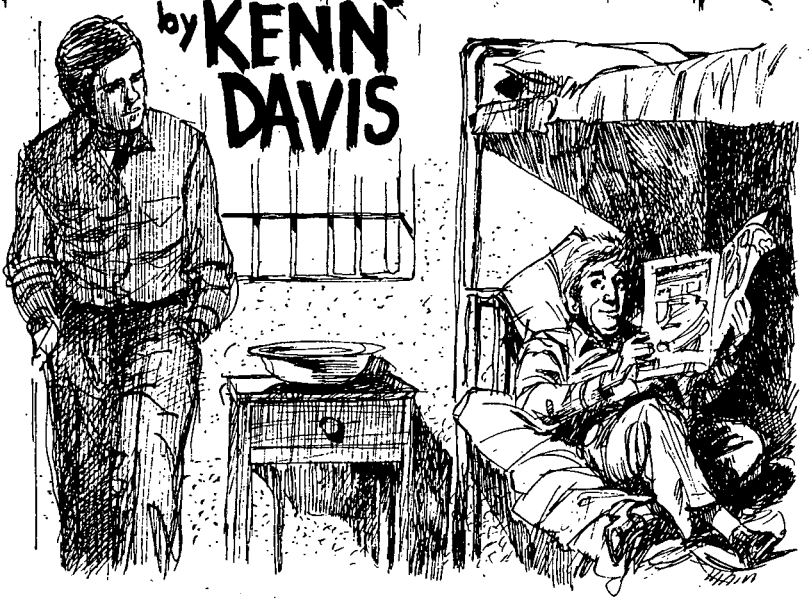
To Toby, it was almost like reading his own obituary . . .

DEAD RINGER

by KENN DAVIS



"What are you looking at?" Humble asked.

"You," Doc Manger said.

Humble stopped pacing the narrow length of the jail cell and stared hard at his cellmate. "You've been seeing me for over four months, Doc. What's so special now?"

Doc Manger shoved over a Sunday-newspaper supplement magazine and pointed to an article. Humble took it.

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"Look," Manger said. "Marvin Knoff, forty-two-year-old heir to the Knoff fortune, unexpectedly died. The bulk of the estate will go to his missing twin brother—*if he can be found*. If Emil Knoff, the twin brother, isn't found within six months of Marvin Knoff's death, the entire estate will be turned over to various educational institutions and charities listed in the will. That prospect depresses me considerably."

Toby Humble looked at the newspaper photograph of Marvin Knoff. "It's spooky," he said. "That photograph—it's almost like I'm reading my own obituary!"

"It's positively fortuitous," Manger said excitedly. "A consummate resemblance! The same wide trusting eyes, the corresponding firm mouth, ditto the fulsome though broken nose, even the identical way of combing the hair. You're perfect, Toby! A dead ringer."

Humble grimaced at Manger's phrase and resumed his pacing. He was in his late thirties but looked years younger. Ever since he was a young man, he had been puzzled by the world around him. His teenaged years had been a fuzzy, distorted time of anxiety. The techniques of day-to-day living had always eluded him. So he stole things—and was usually caught. Now he was in jail for petty theft. Once again bad luck and unfortunate circumstances had allowed the law to get its hands on him.

Doc Manger was in on a minor con rap. He was older than Toby Humble, in his mid-fifties, with scraggly grey hair and a sense of his own worth, which he thought considerable. In contrast to Humble's larger frame, Manger was narrow, whiplike. He could bluster, he could wheedle. His eyes seemed to pierce deep into people's souls and manipulate the greed he found there. Doc Manger was the name he currently used. He had forgotten many of his previous aliases. Over the years he had been jailed in a dozen states.

"Toby," he said, "you're getting out of here in a month—two weeks after me. We have all that time to find out as much as possible about Marvin Knoff, deceased. We can check him out in the jail library. And if the plan appeals to you, when I'm released I'll continue the research on the outside. When you're out you can join me and we can go to this town—Allerton, Colorado—which the article says the Knoff family once practically owned."

"Colorado? That's a few states away."

"So much the better. A little traveling will do us both good. Away from the stench of incarceration. Ah, Allerton—a wholesome village in the

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mountains. Clean air, lush green grass, soaring trees, God's own blue skies. A hick town."

Humble stared again at the photo of Marvin Knoff in the supplement. "And you want me to impersonate the missing brother."

"Correct, my astute young friend." Manger nodded energetically. "The article states that twin brother Emil ran away from home when he was fifteen. He's been missing for over twenty-seven years. Apparently he was a hell-raiser, a real problem child. Emil didn't get along with Marvin at all, even broke his nose once. And yours looks just like it."

"Yeah, mine was broken in a fight," Humble said, listening thoughtfully to the older man.

"And here's the rest of it—the twins' parents spent a lot of money searching for Emil, but he was never found. The parents died in an auto accident when Marvin was twenty. And Emil too, of course. That was twenty-two years ago."

"And this guy Marvin Knoff died unexpectedly of a coronary a couple of months ago?"

"Yes, my boy. Unfortunately for him—fortunately for us. I can't think of any reason why we shouldn't collect some of that estate."

Humble could think of a lot of reasons, and he proceeded to lay them out for the sake of argument, but Doc Manger waved his magic-wand hands and countered every argument with logic and a fanatical gleam in his eyes.

"Toby, surely you perceive my plan," Manger said finally. "I'm not a witless blunderer. You won't have to impersonate the missing brother for the rest of your life. Just long enough for the two of us to grab some ready cash. Maybe ten thousand dollars, maybe twenty thousand. Who knows?"

"I don't know nothing about this guy—or the twin," Humble complained.

"Ah," Manger said with a twinkle in his eye, "after I have checked out the landscape, as it were, of Allerton—unobtrusively, you may be sure—you will know enough about the Knoff family to put this over. Before the trustees tumble to the fact you're not the missing twin, we'll have vanished over the horizon—to greener pastures, my young friend—a team to contend with. Confederates, Toby. Colleagues."

Humble finally agreed that for the money involved the plan might be worth the risk.

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In the weeks that followed, they scoured the jail library for all that was available in newspapers and news magazines on Marvin Knoff. There wasn't much personal information, but his death had created a flurry of stories in various regional newspapers. The estate was temporarily in the hands of trustees, presided over by a Mr. Wickam. The Knoff holdings consisted of a mercantile bank, a trust and title company, a department store, and a small local opera house.

The largest holding was the Knoff copper mine, which had been owned by the family for eighty-five years. Little was known of the missing brother except that there had been bad blood between Marvin and Emil and the citizens of Allerton had apparently sighed in relief when Emil had run away from home.

When Doc Manger was released, he went to Denver, the closest large city to Allerton. There he had access to more information about the Knoff family and filled several notebooks with facts and figures. He traveled several times to Allerton, looked the town over, and drew a map of the estate's extensive layout.

Humble would have a lot of material to memorize. Manger hoped he would be up to the task.

Several weeks later, Humble arrived in Denver. He was amazed at the amount of information Manger had accumulated. And since there was little on *Emil* Knoff, there was little danger of running into anyone who would remember enough about the boy after twenty-seven years to interfere with their scheme.

In their shabby hotel room, Toby Humble committed to memory all the information Manger had found on the family. In only a few days, he responded promptly when addressed as Emil.

He paced the small street-front room, memorizing from Doc Manger's notebooks. As Manger watched him with a strange look in his eyes, Humble glanced up from the notebook. "What are you looking at?" he asked.

"I was just wondering what I truly know about you." Manger's voice was tight. "We met in jail. I only know what you told me about yourself."

"So?"

"My boy, I've tried hoodwinking people with other partners, some of them quite intelligent, but none of them had the gift you have, the quick study—you've absorbed everything more rapidly than I'd dreamed and

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you respond at once when I call you Emil. You're very good, Toby. Maybe *too* good."

"Hey, Doc, don't get any crazier ideas. You're thinking maybe I really *am* Emil Knoff? I'm thirty-eight years old, not forty-two. And I remember my own father and mother."

"They're both dead, Toby. You told me that."

"Yes. My mom died when I was ten and my dad died four years ago. I grew up in San Pedro, California, not in Allerton."

Doc Manger scowled. "Sorry, Toby. I guess this scam is getting to me."

Finally they were ready. The two men boarded an inter-city bus, dressed neatly but not expensively. The bus breezed through the mountain passes and the cool valleys. While Manger slept beside him, Humble stared out the window at the mountains' grandeur. When his dozing friend woke, he said, "I been thinking, Doc."

"Oh? And what thoughts have invaded your intellectual faculties?"

"About this Emil guy—maybe he ain't never coming back. I've been thinking, what with this family hatred between Marvin and Emil—"

"Yes?"

Manger kept his eyes half closed, his arms folded comfortably across his chest.

"It's possible that the reason Emil hasn't been found—hasn't been heard from—is that he's dead. Maybe he never ran away at all. What if Marvin killed Emil—in a quarrel maybe—then told everybody, including his parents, that Emil had run away. It's a possibility, isn't it?"

"A fine line of ratiocination, Toby. I wondered how long it would take you to think of that. What if it were true? Well, Marvin is dead, and the family is dead. Obviously, if Marvin killed Emil it was never found out. And it's unlikely it would be discovered at this late date."

Humble mulled this over. "Yeah, Doc, O.K. But what if Emil is alive? He just might show up after we've made our claim. Then there'd be two of us claiming to be Emil."

"Then our plan is terminated and we depart sooner than we planned, that's all. A mere change in the timetable."

The bus pulled into the Allerton depot. Humble and Manger left the bus station and walked along the main commercial street until they saw

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a sign over the large department store: KNOFF'S. They walked on and as they walked, they became aware of several citizens staring at Humble as if they thought Marvin Knoff's ghost walked the bright noonday street.

They found the sheriff's office. The name on the door identified him as Roy Kyner.

"My God!" Kyner said when Humble stepped out of the sunlight into the shady cool office. "My God," he repeated, getting to his feet.

Humble smiled and held out his hand. "Sheriff? I'm Emil Knoff."

Kyner shook his head, then he brightened and pumped Humble's hand. "For a second there," he said, "I thought old Marv had come back to life. The resemblance is astounding."

Humble introduced Doc Manger to the sheriff.

"Where've you been, Emil?" Kyner asked. "Wickam and the other trustees have spent a lot of time and money trying to track you down."

"Well, Sheriff, I'd like to be able to tell you that I've changed a lot since I ran away, but it just isn't so. The only reason I came back is because I could use the money. After I ran away, I kept getting into more and more trouble. I changed my name. I call myself Toby Humble. Marvin was always telling me I should respect the family more—be more humble—stuff like that." He smiled tentatively. "Anyway after I got into a few scrapes with the law, I joined the Army to avoid going to jail. I've seen a lot of the world, kept getting into trouble. The worse it got, the less I wanted to contact my family. I didn't even hear about Mom and Dad's accident until a year after it happened. After that—" Humble shrugged "—there didn't seem much point in coming back to Allerton."

Sheriff Kyner picked up the telephone. "I'll call Mr. Wickam," he said.

"Well, Sheriff," Doc Manger said, "don't expect too much from Emil here. Tigers don't change their stripes, they say."

"Doc's right, Sheriff," Humble said. "I won't pretend to have a head for business like Marvin had."

"We'll see," Kyner said.

In a few minutes Humble and Manger were in the sheriff's car heading out of town to the Knoff estate. "What do they do for fun in Allerton?" Manger asked Kyner.

"Well, Mr. Manger, Emil here can tell you the town hasn't changed much in all these years. We got all the modern conveniences, even our own local TV station. There's dancin' at the local clubs and even a disco

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place. And there's the annual picnic for the families and the employees of the Knoff Department Store. Once in a while—" Kyner chuckled "—we get a sort of modern version of the ol' snake-oil salesman. You know, some sharp city fella who thinks we're still in the nineteenth century, sellin' phony aluminum siding, get-rich-quick mutual funds, that kind of thing. I check on 'em, of course, and when they don't measure up we have a little fun with 'em."

Doc Manger gulped. "Like riding them out of town on a rail?"

"Tar and feathers?" Kyner laughed. "Nah, I just give 'em enough rope and see that they do a little time in the county jail."

The car turned up a slight grade and passed between open iron grillwork gates. The sprawling Georgian-style mansion was on a knoll, with a well tended lawn spreading in all directions. Fountains sprinkled on the lawn. Kyner parked the car on the curved driveway in front of the wide entrance. He got out and held the car door open for Humble and Manger.

"It's been a long time," Humble said, pressing a trembling hand to his forehead.

They went up the stairs and Kyner pressed the bell. The door was opened by an older man with white hair.

"Hello, Patterson," Humble said. "I'm back."

The butler's mouth was agape. He stepped back inside, gesturing to the three men to enter. "I apologize for staring, sir. For a moment—with the sun in my eyes—you looked just like Mr. Marvin."

He led the men into the spacious front room. Humble moved slowly, staring at the statues, tables, the old grandfather clock with great familiarity. He gazed at the collection of paintings, then turned and stepped through the French windows and crossed the flagstone terrace. Doc Manger, Sheriff Kyner, and Patterson followed.

Humble went down a flight of stone steps and walked slowly to a small meadow beyond the formal gardens. Part of the meadow was a private cemetery, and there Humble found the Knoff family plots, where he stood for a few moments with his head bowed over the well-tended graves.

They returned inside as Mr. Wickam arrived. Kyner introduced them and they sat at the massive dining-room table. Wickam showed Humble the legal documents and explained the procedures of turning over the estate. According to the will there was ninety thousand dollars in cash in a bank account, and stocks and negotiable bonds worth over two mil-

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lion. To begin the legal procedures, Emil merely had to declare himself Emil Knoff and sign the first of many legal papers. Humble stood, and Mr. Wickam formally asked him if he was indeed Emil Knoff. Toby swore that he was, took the pen, and signed the first document.

Sheriff Kyner stepped forward. "Mr. Humble—or whatever your name is—you're under arrest for attempted fraud. You too, Mr. Manger."

Wickam stepped back, retrieving the papers, a curious smile playing over his narrow face. Humble and Manger stared at Kyner, their faces pale and incredulous.

"Don't waste your time denying it, fellas," Kyner said. He took out a pair of handcuffs and clamped them onto the two men's wrists. "I knew you weren't Emil Knoff the moment you stepped into my office."

"How?" Doc Manger asked.

"Well, fellas," Kyner said, chuckling, "Emil was Marvin's twin, all right. Born of the same father and mother—eight minutes later than Marvin. And you're a dead ringer for Marvin, all right, Humble. But the boys were *fraternal* twins, not identical twins. *Emil* didn't look anything like his brother."

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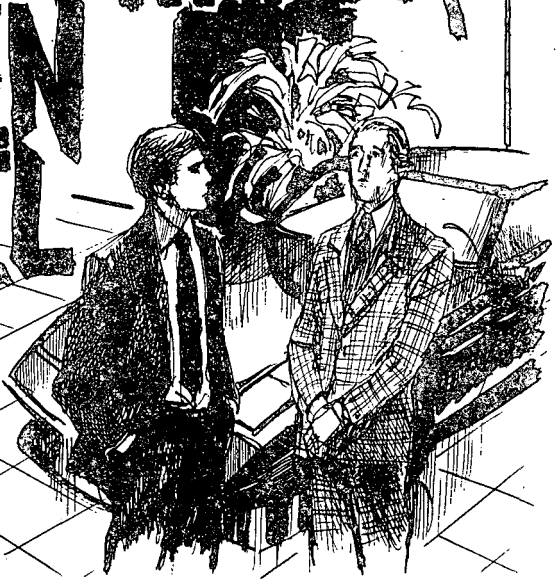
It's a short step into no-no land . . .

WORSE THAN A FALLEN ANGEL

by ERNEST SAVAGE



There wasn't a car on the showroom floor for under $20,000. I felt as out of place as a hobo at a debutante's ball.

But I wasn't there to buy.

I had been a cop on the San Francisco Police Department for nineteen years and have been a private investigator since I resigned because of the police strike in '75, as a matter of principle. I don't believe policemen, doctors, firemen, or garbagemen have a right to strike—which is the

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position generally taken by law—and generally ignored. But in a quarter of a century you take on the coloration of your trade. You wear its aura. People think "cop" as you walk through the door. It's useful; I've seldom been asked to show identification. I just start asking questions.

And a notebook is a good prop. You flip it open, look solemn, and say, as in this case, "So Mr. Marsh—David Marsh—paid cash for his car?"

"Yes, sir," the modish salesman said respectfully. "In hundred-dollar bills. More of them than I generally see at one time. Almost twenty-six thousand dollars' worth." His eyes glowed with the memory.

"That was a month ago?"

"Yes, sir."

I thanked him and walked out, crossed a stretch of tarmac to my aging Dodge Dart parked at the curb.

Early that morning, Mrs. Iris Marsh, David's wife, had phoned and told me her husband had been missing since Monday noon, four days ago. She said she had once met me at a social function, but that of course I wouldn't remember—which was true. But I would remember her husband, she said, and that was true too. Ten or twelve years ago we'd worked the same shift out of Central Station.

"He always admired you, Mr. Train. I guess that's why I called you instead of someone else."

"That may not help, Mrs. Marsh."

"But you were both policemen," she said, as if it were the same thing as both of us being, say, wolves, with shared instincts, habits, and purposes. Which might be true. I told her I'd come out to the house.

She lived in a clapboard bungalow in the Richmond district. It needed paint, the asphalt roof-shingles were curled at the edges, a crack arced across the front-door window glass.

But inside, on the living-room floor, the 12×15 oriental rug would have pleased the late Shah of Iran or one of Ingres' odalisques. It was glorious, a conversation stopper. I stared at it speechless for two or three beats of the heart. She'd fielded the response.

"We have no savings account," she said. "Dave believes in things, not money."

Against the opposite wall was a hand-carved walnut library table, six feet long, disproportionate to the room, but it represented five or six

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thousand dollars' worth of artful human toil. On it was an original Tiffany lamp, above it a large-framed water color by Millard Sheets. I have in my apartment two Dong Kingmans and three Jake Lees, all lovely and valuable. I would have traded the lot for the Sheets—and reroofed the house to boot. There should have been a velvet cord across the living-room door. We didn't go in. She led me into the kitchen and sat me down at a chipped formica table. She got out doughnuts and poured coffee, her hand shaking a little.

"Where was he going," I asked her, "when he left last Monday?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me."

"What was he driving?"

"His new car—a Porsche."

"Have you reported him missing?"

"Only to you. He's a policeman, Mr. Train. Was. It would be like reporting a prowler in the neighborhood. It's the sort of thing you—what?—take care of yourself. Do you understand?"

"More or less. But I don't buy it, Mrs. Marsh. The police can do a much better job than I can. You've got another reason, haven't you?"

"No—not really." She was in her late thirties or early forties, a big, but still well contained and shapely woman. Her wide-set eyes were blue and direct and full of worry. "He wouldn't want me to. It's a matter of pride, Mr. Train."

"His, not yours."

Her eyes dropped. "And besides, he's only been retired for six weeks. After twenty years. He's been handling things like this for other people all that time."

"So where would he have been most apt to go? Does he hunt or fish?"

"No. His hobby is sailing. He would most likely have gone to my brother's, but he didn't—I checked."

I remembered something else then. "Your brother's a cop too. They worked together. The name slips my mind."

"Herndon—Jim. Yes, they were partners most of their time on the force. They retired together."

"Damon and Pythias?"

"No—but best friends, good friends."

"Where does Jim live?" I got out the ubiquitous notebook.

"On his boat. On their boat. Oh, Lord—on *our* boat! We own it jointly. The boys built it, Dave and Jim."

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"Where is it?"

"Near China Basin."

"Where exactly?"

She gave me an intricate set of directions, and I wrote them down. It wasn't a marina, she said, but a private dock; hard to find.

I studied her a moment. She was being reticent, editing her responses. Her eyes dropped again; not demurely, just self-aware.

"Where did they build the boat?" I asked. "Your yard's not big enough."

"They built it at Jim's. His yard *was* big enough, Mr. Train. He and Stella are divorced. It was her house, her family home."

"Where?"

She told me and I wrote that down too. The Bayshore area.

She'd taken one bite of a doughnut and pushed the rest aside. I'd eaten both of mine. From a pack of cigarettes in her blouse pocket she took one out and lit it. She was a worried woman—and why shouldn't she be? Four days is a long time to be missing. She should have called the cops on Tuesday. I said, "One of the first things I'll do is call one of my old friends in the department."

"What for?" Her eyes snapped up.

"To check on the Porsche." I could have added, but didn't, and any old bodies left lying about. "What's the license number of the car?"

She told me.

"What color? Where did he buy it?"

She told me and then I asked her bluntly if she and David were having domestic trouble and she said they weren't, convincingly. They were planning a trip next month to Bonn, Germany, to visit their son, who was a Marine assigned to embassy duty there. "We're lucky," she added finally, chin up. "We've always been in love."

I liked her. I said, "I remember now where we met. It was at a party thrown by a precinct captain, Captain Emery. A long time ago."

She smiled, delighted. "Yes." It's nice to be remembered.

I got up and told her I'd report back when I had something to report. She showed me to the door and watched me go down the walk to my car and waved as I drove away. I tried hard not to think of her as a widow.

The first place I went after lunch was to the Porsche dealership where David had bought his car. Twenty-six thousand dollars' worth, more or less; a lot of money for a retired cop.

And cash at that.

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Stella Herndon lived in a very old house with a serrated view of the Bay across the rooftops of other very old houses. She was a slender forty-year-old, dark-eyed and dark-haired, tense and quick. I told her who I was and why I'd knocked on her door, and she let me in. "I didn't know," she said. "Iris didn't tell me David was missing."

"Nor Jim?"

"No." She closed the door behind me and led me quickly through the house to the kitchen. She'd been ironing, and the iron was up-ended on the board, a girl's dress half done. "No," she repeated, going back to her work. "Jim and I haven't exchanged ten words since our divorce." There was no particular emotional charge to the statement; it was just a fact. "I suppose you know about the divorce?"

I nodded. "David's been gone since Monday noon. Iris could give me only one lead—your husband, the boat."

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm on my way there. It was convenient to stop off here first in case you had any ideas."

"I don't."

"When did they launch the boat?" I looked out the kitchen window. There was still a lot of the construction debris scattered around the yard, aging in the weather. I've never quite understood people who build boats in their back yards. Or in bottles.

"They didn't 'launch' it," she said, her eyes on her work. "They picked it up with a helicopter and dropped it in the Bay. Two and a half years ago."

"How big is it?"

"Thirty feet at the water line, or something like that. A ketch, they called it."

"It must have been quite a sight."

"I wouldn't know. I'd left the house."

The kitchen was big, high-ceilinged, old-fashioned. In passing through from the front I'd noticed nothing out of the ordinary in the way of furniture. The refrigerator against the far kitchen wall looked all of twenty years old. But they built some of them better then, didn't they?

"Does Jim pay you alimony?"

She looked up.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"I take that as a negative answer."

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"When you see him—*if* you see him, he's elusive—tell him he's six months behind. But he knows that."

"How many children, Mrs. Herndon?"

"Two—both girls."

"Child support?"

"Six months behind." The iron momentarily savaged the dress, flattening out a flounce.

I said, "I know approximately what his pension is—within a few hundred dollars. It won't support two households."

"I own this place, Mr. Train. I *own* it. I was born here. Also, I have a small independent income." She smiled wryly, the iron still attacking hard. "It's more reliable than Jim. But the second household in this case is the boat. He lives on it. What's more, he pays no rent for the dock or whatever you call it. Dockage?"

"Ah," I said foolishly, and she grinned at me, her dark eyes mocking.

She said, "Are you a detective, or just a snoop?"

"A little of both, probably."

"Well, when you're detecting, find out what happened to Jim about three years ago that turned him from a nice guy into a bastard."

"Now I get to say 'Ah,' " I said. "What do *you* think it was?"

"I don't know. He'd never talk about it, but it had something to do with the job. He brought it home with him one day from the station. It was as if he'd found a new girl—his true love."

"Had he?"

"No, it wasn't that. I would have known. But it was something that powerful."

"Anything to do with Dave?"

"No, I don't think so. They remained partners on the job and Iris tells me they retired on the same day. And they sail that goddamn boat together every chance they get. No, it was something else."

"Three years ago?"

"Something like that."

"Can you be more specific? Can you pinpoint it?"

She took the finished dress, fit it on a hanger, and hung it on a hook behind her, one of those turn-of-the-century wire jobs. The house was probably a treasure trove of old-time hardware.

She ruminated a moment before saying, "December. Around Christmas sometime. It worried me—took the edge off my holiday spirit. Three

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and a *half* years ago, Mr. Train. Golly, how time flies when you're happy."

"Did he kill someone? I mean in the line of duty?"

"No, that never bothered him the two or three times it happened. All of his killings were—what do they call them?"

"Righteous. Righteous killings."

"My, what a godly-sounding phrase. Bureaucratese is sometimes almost religious, isn't it?"

"Sometimes. Did you resent his being a cop?"

"No. I resented his becoming something else—whatever it was. I resent my Christmas present three and a half years ago, Mr. Train. It turned out to be the divorce."

Her husband's home wasn't there. Instead, there was an empty slip and a vacant dock abutting a bleakly weathered warehouse, forlorn and abandoned-looking in the fading light of day. The sun had long since dropped behind the peninsula's vaunted golden hills, leaving me and a lot else in the semi-dark. The water was opalescent with the sheen of oil, seemingly still, the tide perhaps at neap. It was quiet.

A rusting railroad spur extended half the length of the warehouse. It hadn't been used in years. The dock took up where the rails left off, ran the remaining length of the building, and elled around the front on the canal side. Across the canal's scummy waters, a large sheet-metal building loomed grey-black in the gathering dark. Work all over the basin had stopped for the day; night lights were already on here and there. The tracks of the spur were packed flat with long-gathered dirt and debris. A six-or seven-year-old blue Pinto was parked on the rails, snug against the warehouse wall. Junk, oily chunks of wood, rusting metal scraps, paper, cartons, and beer cans littered the scene. The air smelled rancid.

Near the landside end of the warehouse, there was a door with a small window next to it. Black paint over the door read OFFICE. A man came out of it and walked toward me, biggish, his aura that of guard, a bulldog. Grey hair tufted out from under a soiled railroad engineer's cap. He had a cigar in his mouth, the kind you chew, not smoke. From ten feet away he said, "You lookin' for somethin', buddy?" His aura had defeated mine; people seldom call me buddy.

"Yeah," I said equably. "A white Porsche with blue trim." I recited the license number. "You seen it lately?"

"I don't get to see much down here," he said, an evasion I judged to

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be worth about ten dollars. I got out my wallet and fingered up a sawbuck, rolled it around my thumb like a flag. "When lately?" he said, close enough now to read the number on the bill.

"Let's say Monday. Afternoon, probably. Maybe parked overnight."

"Well, let's see, this is Friday, innit?" I proffered the ten, which he took and frowned at as though it were Chinese. I got out another, but held it, waiting. "Monday, you say? Well, yes, I guess there was this white car parked over there by the warehouse. But what make I couldn't tell you." His eyes fell on the undelivered bill.

"When," I said, "is Herndon coming back?"

His eyes didn't move, nor did he question the name. "Hell, who knows? He comes and goes at all hours and never tells nobody nothin'."

"He drove the white car away, didn't he? Like maybe Tuesday morning?"

"That I can't tell you, Mister."

"Can't? Or won't? Or scared to?"

His eyes engaged mine, proving that money isn't everything.

"Nothin' in this goddamn world," he said convincingly, "scares me. I said can't, pal, because I don't work Tuesdays. Wednesday morning it was gone."

I extended the ten and he stalled a prideful five seconds before taking it and shambling back to the office, his back rounded like an ape's.

Sergeant Bill Brady is my last remaining friend and contact on the San Francisco Police Force. Bill entertains the notion—no longer really a hope—that he and I will open a partnership when he retires, a swanky high-rise office, computerized operation, bunches of employees, millions rolling in. It has become, mostly, a pleasant fantasy. But when I ask him something that only a working cop can find out, he seldom fails me.

That night I handed him a stinker, a file-clerk's job, which he—as who doesn't—hates.

"The whole month of December," I said in elaboration. "The daily work sheets for both of them. Anything unusual that turns up."

"Like what, for instance?" I could hear the TV going in the background. He was at home, relaxed.

"I don't know, Bill. Use your cop's instinct. A report that looks doctored or incomplete. Look for anything heavy that might have involved money."

"What kind of money?"

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"I don't know—big money. Nothing on the order of a mugging or a liquor-store holdup, or even a bank job."

"Dope, maybe?"

"Maybe—in fact, probably. Anything where there was a bunch of cash lying around they could slicker."

Bill demurred at that. "They were good cops, Sam. I had 'em on a shift two years ago."

"So did I—years ago. But you know the work. Anybody can go bad, given the right provocation."

"You couldn't have, Sam. I couldn't have."

I grinned into the phone, remembering certain dicey times in my career, certain ethical crossroads with no clear directional signs. A cop is always running into money—usually small amounts, but occasionally awesome. And always—even if only marginally—tempting. We're all sons of Adam, self-edited into innocence. "But *they* could," I said agreeably. "And I think they did. Also, Bill—check current reports for anything on a new Porsche, blue and white, license number NRY 642. Also, any unidentified recent murderee who could conceivably be Dave Marsh. Maybe a body fished out of the Bay."

"You think he's dead?"

"Let me put it this way—I don't think he's alive. I'll call you tomorrow."

It was nearly nine when I hung up and I debated a moment between phoning Irish Marsh or going to see her. I went to see her.

She had a drink in her hand when she opened the door, and it wasn't the evening's first. She said, "Sam!" spontaneously, and then—catching herself—revised it to, "Mr. Train, come in." I preferred "Mr. Train." She was attractive. She was bedeviled. She smelled death, widowhood—it was in her eyes. I wanted to keep a certain formality between us.

She'd been watching TV in a small den behind the living room, and I got to walk—treading softly—across the Kurdistani, or whatever it was, and to glance again at the Millard Sheets. These goodies were clues, and I was detecting. She turned off the television and offered me a drink, which I accepted. She was afraid to ask me what I'd found out, and the booze was designed to cushion that fear. She was wobbly on her good-looking legs as she returned from the kitchen.

"I want you to think back," I said bluntly, "to December 1978. Something happened then to Dave and your brother on the job."

She handed me my drink and sat down facing me. "Something hap-

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pened to them every day on the job, Mr. Train. It's that kind of work."

"Don't equivocate. I take it I've rung a bell."

She shrugged.

"He bought me the Millard Sheets for Christmas. That's all that happened. It was the most thrilling present I'd ever gotten."

"Also an investment, right? Instead of a bank account."

"Yes, so he told me at the time. And it's more valuable now than it was then. So's all that other stuff in there, Mr. Train."

"When did he buy those things—the carpet, for instance?"

"Last year."

"For how much?"

"I'd hate to tell you."

"What you mean is that you don't want to think about it. Do you know how much he paid for the Porsche last month? In cash?"

"No."

"And you don't want to know, do you? Think back, Mrs. Marsh. What happened in December of '78 that made him rich?"

Tears welled in her eyes. She put her drink down. "I don't know."

"How come, Mrs. Marsh, your brother can't pay his child support bill but your husband can spend a fortune on a car?"

"I don't know."

"How come your former sister-in-law tells me that her husband changed radically at that time—became a different person? What's the matter with your brother, Mrs. Marsh? What's the matter with your husband? What happened to the two of them at the same time?"

She was crying openly, miserably. I'd beat on her hard and fast. If she feared she was a widow—and that was plain now—the corollary fear must be that her brother had made her one. That's a lot for a woman to find on her plate all at once. I studied her for a moment, considering. I could get what I needed to know from Brady tomorrow—or from her tonight. Or, most likely, it could be gotten only from Herndon himself.

I took a different tack. "China Basin," I said, "is a funny place to keep a yacht."

"We couldn't afford anyplace else," she blubbered, then paused to reconsider. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "Yes, it *is* a funny place to keep a yacht," she said bitterly. "A *damn* funny place, Sam."

I smiled, pleased. I was ready for "Sam" now, and welcomed it. She needed a friend, not an inquisitor. She picked up her glass again and we

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drank to a new, tacit pact. Some women look freshened after tears. She was one of them.

"I went down there late this afternoon," I said, "but the boat was gone. The guard—or whatever he is—says it comes and goes at all hours."

"They fish a lot."

"Do they catch anything, Iris?" There had been irony in her tone.

She shrugged. "Not much. But they're learning how to sail."

"Is this their first boat?"

"Their first *real* boat. They dreamed about it for years, and then it took them almost four years to build it. But it's a beauty."

"I'm looking forward," I said with care, "to seeing it. Because I think that's where the answers are. Don't you, Iris? The guard told me Dave's Porsche was parked there Monday afternoon. The inference is that Dave was out on the boat with your brother. The car was gone on Wednesday when the guard came back to work."

She flinched, but it was what I had to do—tie her missing husband to her brother and the boat. It was nothing new to her; she just hadn't heard it said aloud before. I got up and she showed signs of not wanting me to go. She didn't want to be alone. It had taken on a sinister edge.

At the door she stopped me a moment. "It's bad, isn't it, Sam? It's as bad as it can be."

"I don't know for sure, Iris. I don't know anything for sure. Tomorrow I'll know more. Has Jim got a phone down there?"

"Not that I know of. Are you going there tomorrow?"

"There's noplace else to go, honey."

I called Brady at ten the next morning. I knew he got to work at eight, and hoped he might have turned something up in two hours. And he had. He'd been able to check the daily reports through the ninth and had stopped there, his interest caught. My call came a few minutes later.

"They found a Dodge van near Army Street on the Bay side of the Freeway," he said. "Two dead guys in the back, each shot by the other at close range—as ballistics later proved. Known members of rival dope operations."

It sounded good. "What time of day?"

"Night, about 8:30—dark at that time of the year. Marsh and Herndon were in civvies, driving an unmarked car. About fifty feet away from the van was a dark-green Caddie, registered to one of the dead men, the

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black. The other guy was white. Both about twenty-five. But a funny thing, Sam—"

"No money was found."

"Right—and no dope. It looked like a buy setup, and a big one. We know these two outfits sometimes trade supplies, when they aren't killing each other, so you'd expect something—money, dope, or both. At least, in retrospect, you would."

"What's their report say?"

"They radioed in for the meat wagon and a technical squad right away. The Caddie, the van, and the whole area were gone over that night and the next day. Nothing was found. But, Sam, those guys were such straight arrows that nobody suspected a thing. I remember the case now clearly. I didn't either."

"The third man theme, huh?"

"Yeah, the theory was that someone else was involved and took off with the goodies. And it looked good until now. But it could be that you're right."

"Yeah," I said, and thanked him and hung up quickly. Time, I felt, was wasting.

It was eleven-thirty when I parked the Dart just behind the Pinto alongside the warehouse at China Basin and got out. Fifty feet ahead of me, Herndon had just thrown off the fore shoreline of his boat and was walking aft—my way—to release the stern line, when he saw me and stopped. He was wearing blue jeans, a heavy denim jacket with deep side pockets, a yachtsman's billed cap—dressed for sailing on a cool day. I was still thirty feet away when he said, grinning, "Well, for chrissakes—Sam Train!"

It had been twelve or more years since we'd set eyes on each other. I couldn't have picked him out of a crowd of two unless he was in uniform. We hadn't seen that much of each other. It would have been flattering to think that I hadn't changed that much in a dozen hard years, but it was more realistic to assume that he'd been tipped off I was coming. By his sister, maybe. I sighed, thinking that, and then watched a blue-metal revolver appear in his hand—a .38 from the look of the muzzle. He'd gotten the drop on me, but it had cleared my mind wonderfully.

The tide was ebbing slowly, the boat held snug against the tire-carcass bumpers fixed to the pilings of the dock by the soft, steady pressure.

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"Come aboard, Lieutenant," he said, recalling my old rank.

I stood firm. "Where's Dave Marsh?"

"Come aboard, or I'll shoot you in the kneecap right here."

He meant it. It was Saturday. Threading my way through the basin, I hadn't seen a soul. The bulldog guard was not in sight either. The taffrail was about a foot below the dock level. I stepped onto it and then onto the cockpit seat-cushion and then the deck. He'd moved behind the wheel and binnacle, six feet between us. "Down the hatch now, Sam," he said. "And put your hands on the back of your neck—you know the drill."

"Am I under arrest, officer?"

"Move it!"

The hatch cover was all the way forward, the hatch steps clear. I went down them slowly and carefully, and felt the presence of his gun draw nearer from behind. The cabin had six feet of head room, three inches less than my need. Crouching, my hands still in position, I turned and faced him. He had seated himself on the top hatch step, silhouetted against a bright blue sky. It made his eyes hard to read, but I had read them once and that was enough. He was a good cop gone bad; it is worse than a fallen angel.

"Now take off your jacket," he said. "Easy does it."

I did, and dropped it on the starboard bunk. There was a Colt AR45 assault rifle there I hadn't noticed before. My jacket partly covered it.

"Now the shoulder holster, Sam. And I don't have to tell you what'll happen if you make a false move."

I took it off, dropped it on the jacket, and said, "It'll happen anyway, won't it, Herndon?"

He ignored that. "Now the pants. And shirt and shoes. The works."

"Why?"

"You asked me where Dave is. I'm gonna show you. But no sense in ruining good clothes, is there?"

I knelt down to untie my shoes, taking my time. He had an old stratagem in mind: strip a man naked and you more than disarm him, you shame him. Then he would kill me.

"What you did," I said, fumbling with a shoelace, "was take the money—and probably the dope—from the Dodge van on Army Street and whip it over to your place in Bayshore. I checked a map. You could probably round-trip it in ten or fifteen minutes. *Then* you radioed in."

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I looked up at him, another clear thought crossing my mind. "You were building the boat then," I said. "You probably built the money and dope right into it. I'm thinking in terms of maybe half a million dollars altogether."

"You've got the right idea, Sam, but the wrong figure. More like eight hundred thou, including the horse. But I admire the way your mind works. Like mine. You see how easy it is, Lieutenant? What a short step it is into no-no land."

"We're all tempted from time to time, Herndon."

"But the strong resist, right? Hurry it up, Sam; you're dogging it."

That was true, but the picture was clearing and I stopped to let it take form. I looked up at him again. He was holding the .38 in both hands, his elbows at rest on his knees. "Dave started spending it, didn't he?" I said. "Right off the bat."

"He was a damn fool!" Herndon grimaced with remembered rage. "We had the money split—his on the starboard side of the boat, mine on the port." His eyes and the muzzle of the gun tracked from right to left as he spoke, and my eye went with his. He noticed. "You couldn't find it in a week, Sam. I can get at it in three minutes, but you'd have to tear the boat apart."

"Three minutes? You should've made it tougher than that. Maybe Marsh wouldn't've—"

"No. Nothing would have stopped him. He had the itch. He kept arguing that every day the money remained in storage it was worth less. Inflation. He couldn't see past his nose. There was only one way to stop him, and when he bought that goddamn Porsche I knew I had to do it. A retired cop buying a car like that is like posting a billboard saying, 'I'm a thief.' "

"Where's the Porsche?"

"I don't know. Maybe Mexico by now, maybe South America. How many guys do you know in San Francisco who can make a car disappear before your very eyes, and hand you money while they do it? One advantage of being a cop for twenty years—you get to know the really important people."

"What are you gonna do with the loot, Herndon?"

"Go into business. I'm in it already. I'm beginning to make my moves. In six months I'll be worth a million."

"Heroin?"

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"Persian—the best. I can pick it up offshore and bring it right back here. Ninety percent pure, worth a thousand bucks a gram."

"Then you can pay your child-support bills."

He laughed. "Best cover I've got. Maybe I will, maybe I won't. But you see the difference? The world thinks I'm broke, while it thinks Marsh won the Irish Sweepstakes. But cops don't win the Irish Sweepstakes."

"Was he going along with your plans?"

"No, not really. He was dragging his feet from the first. He wanted to take it all out and invest it in rugs, for chrissakes!"

"Some guys don't have that finely tuned criminal mind, Herndon."

"Like you and me."

"Your wife said you'd changed. What she didn't say is that Jekyll had become Hyde." I shook my head. There was no way out of this, but I had to keep talking. "How much cash was there?"

"Four hundred grand. Two hundred on my side of the boat, about one-fifty left on his."

"Where is he, Herndon?"

"In the Bay, head and hands in one place, the rest in another." He grinned. He'd killed a man, a friend; his heart had died. "You got a preference, Lieutenant?"

I had taken off my shoes and had stood up and removed my pants. I had nothing left on but jockey shorts, but I was more scared than shamed; Herndon was a weapon, a bomb, dehumanized. My head was pressed against the roof of the cabin. Behind him, through the hatch, I could see movement on the sunlit dock. I stared at it, unbelieving.

"You look pretty good for a man your age," he said.

That was nice to know. I said throatily, "Did Iris tell you I was coming?"

He shrugged. "What are sisters for?"

"Did she tell you *she* was coming?"

My eyes were glued on her, in wonder and apprehension. I said nothing, but I didn't need to. He frowned, sensing the hoary "Look out behind you!" trap, but there was a line of tension between Iris and me now, zinging past his ear like a shot. His head half turned, he shifted his seat, his gun wavered; he would have missed me. My body became a spring, compressed and sweating in the close captive air. His head went further around, the gun in one hand now. He saw her from the corner of his left eye, saw movement. Iris stumbled over something on the dock, nearly fell, raised a hand, and was about to speak. Behind her I saw the bulldog

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coming up fast and that pressed my button. I leaped. Herndon was seven or eight feet away.

I hit his gun hand on the wrist, my aim a trifle off. The gun fell onto the cockpit deck. We were a tangle on the hatch steps, he closer to the loose weapon than I. He reached, had it by the barrel. I crawled roughly over his shoulders and head, scrabbled across the cockpit deck, up and over the rail, and into the murky water below. I was telling myself he wasn't quite debased enough to shoot his own sister.

The water was the color of thin motor oil, the bottom an inky black. To my left I could see dimly the pilings of the dock. I stayed down, lungs already bitching for air, and frog-legged toward a piling. I was betting he couldn't see me in that foul soup, that I could stay down long enough to reach the cover of the dock. It was a bad bet, but the game suddenly changed. The pursuer opted to flee.

I heard the engine start—like slow-motion sound—a pressure against the ears, saw bubbles flower back from the spinning prop, felt their soft, viscid shells tickle over my back like a school of startled minnows. He would be at the wheel, steering his boat. I came up blowing like a whale, filled my lungs, and cleared my eyes. I watched the boat turn right into the channel and head for the Bay, and saw for the first time her name. STARFLOWER. Having nothing else to do for the moment but breathe, I translated: Stella means star, Iris is a flower. STARFLOWER, under the circumstances, was a crudely mocking name. But it gave me a parting thought: If ever I catch him, I'll make him eat it.

A piling had cross-pieces attached, forming a ladder. I went up them and over the edge of the dock and sprawled there watching Iris and the guard wrestle with one another a few yards away. He saw me as I stood up, wrenched free of Iris, and faced me. The pistol they'd been fighting over was rigid in his hands. He paused, staring. He must have thought I was a monster from the deep, some mutation of oil, algae, and junk. Later Iris said that the awfulness of how I looked probably saved my life. But I don't agree. What saved it was the oil-blackened length of two-by-four she brought down against his head.

I have been aboard the STARFLOWER four times since then with Iris and her son, Peter. Peter came home on "compassionate leave" from the Marines and will be discharged entirely in a couple of months. He's an excellent sailor and, I think, a good son. The boat is now kept at a proper

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marina, well guarded; the first thing I did after Iris regained actual possession of it was to replace with a stout new one the hatch lock Herndon still had a key for. At that time, alone aboard, I found the money. It took me less than fifteen minutes and I didn't have to break a thing. It was behind a panel covered by a tie-on cushion that made a back rest for the portside bunk when used as a seat. But the panelling and the quarter-round molding that held it in place were flawlessly cut, stained, and varnished, and if I hadn't followed Herndon's eyes as he told me about it it would have taken me longer. The casual eye would have missed it entirely, which was the idea.

The portside cache was empty, as expected; the starboard one, Marsh's, held ten carefully wrapped and sealed packets, each containing $15,000. The packets are still there, six weeks later, still the matrix of most of my dreams at night and my troubled thoughts through the day. Whose money is it? Who has a right to it? Will Herndon come back and get it, or did he intentionally leave it for his sister that day when he abandoned the boat near Hunter's Point? If—or when—he's caught, will he squeal? If I turn it over to Iris or tell her where it is, what about the IRS? And, lastly, what if the bloody boat sinks? Or burns? Or is swiped? What if she decides to sell it, as she has several times talked of doing? Or what if I should die all of a sudden?

This afternoon we were on the Bay again, Peter at the helm, tacking expertly across the variable winds of the day. Iris was below in the galley making sandwiches, fetching beers. I remained in the cockpit admiring Peter's technique; a craven coward. I have a growing neurotic fear of going below, a claustrophobic terror of that particular enclosed space, a fear that I might blurt it all out, wave a frenzied finger, shout, "There it is! In there! Behind that cushion, that panel!"

Last night she and I had dinner together and then went to a show. I have—perforce—taken a custodial view of her, which I fear (but not so much any more) she misreads. She is a robust, vital woman, more attractive and outgoing as the grief of her double loss recedes. David's body—or its parts—have not been found, but she accepts his death, and his perfidy, as facts.

And she has forgiven herself—as I have forgiven her—for warning her brother that I was on my way that Saturday morning. She was momentarily schizoid about him. The sibling in her could not believe that big brother Jim was a killer and a crook. The pragmatic realist knew he was.

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When the sibling was in the ascendant, she phoned the bulldog in the warehouse office to warn Jim I was on my way. She'd lied about having that number. But then, not long after, the realist got in her car and raced to undo the damage. She'd just wanted her brother, she told me later, to sail away unchallenged, unaccused; to elude the mounting proof of guilt. It was her last sisterly impulse. She understands now that people can go bad, even those you love.

Next Monday I'm going up to my cabin in the Sierras for two weeks. I don't normally go up at this time of the year—the fishing is better both before and after now. But the cabin needs some work, and I can pan for a little gold and visit old friends.

But then I'll have to come back—if for no other reason than to earn a living and help hold this desperate city together. And, of course, to see Iris.

And to tell her—what?

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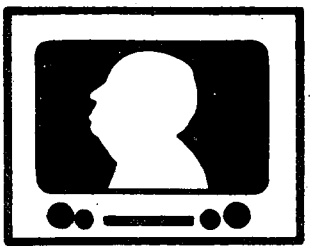

CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

"It was not until several weeks after he had decided to murder his wife that Dr. Bickleigh took any active steps in the matter. Murder is a serious business. The slightest slip may be disastrous. Dr. Bickleigh had no intention of risking disaster."

Those words open Francis Iles' famed 1931 murder novel, *Malice Aforethought*, and the book's delicious sense of arch mischief has been superbly captured in a splendid four-part adaptation on the *Mystery!* series, produced in England and telecast over our PBS network. It is marvelously fashioned from the very first moment: the opening credits are superimposed over a montage which begins with a pompous stuffed-stocking sculpture of a group of English ladies at High Tea, dissolving to a real hand pouring tea into a cup, which in turn dissolves to another hand fingering a wicked syringe over a sinister vial. In a flash, stuffiness, gossip, and poison are suggested to us—the very topics on which the plot turns.

Vincent Price, the genial, saturnine host of this *Mystery!* season, reminds us in his introduction that *Malice Aforethought* was hailed in its day as "the best shocker ever written." Alas, its stunningly clever twist ending—and this has happened to other innovative books before and after (*The Big Bow Mystery* and *Cat of Many Tails* come immediately to mind)—is now less forceful because the surprise has become known, and even used by others. Yet *Malice* still has considerable punch.

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Also, Iles has in other great mystery stories demonstrated his considerable skills. He was the author of *Before the Fact,* which was made into *Suspicion* by Alfred Hitchcock—the film in which a frightened wife (Joan Fontaine in an Academy Award-winning role) suspects her husband of being driven by overwhelming debt into killing her. *Some women give birth to murderers, others marry them . . .* Readers of the book will know that the film's ending is vastly different, and hardly as satisfying, but the wordless scene in which the troubled husband (Cary Grant) carries a possibly poisoned glass of milk upstairs to his wife still chills the memory. Another film, *Flight from Destiny,* in which a man who learns he has only six months to live (Thomas Mitchell) decides to search for a truly obnoxious person against whom he can commit the perfect murder, was based on *Trial and Error* by "Anthony Berkeley," which, like "Francis Iles," was a pseudonym for Anthony Berkeley Cox. In each of these works, interestingly, the mystery is "inverted": we know from the very first page who the murderer will be.

The killer in *Malice Aforethought* is Dr. Teddy Bickleigh, timid and middle-aged, trapped in the English village of Wyvern's Cross, married to a shrewish, snobbish, overbearing tyrant of a wife. A worm at home, he turns elsewhere, acting out Mittylike fantasies with the younger women among his patients, and finding to his surprise that he can occasionally engineer quick, secret conquests—even though he hates the village people with their "souls of clay" and incessant buzz of gossip. Indeed, soon enough the buzz reaches his wife, who informs him she is aware of his "sordid little list" of dalliances, and only increases her bullying. But into the distraught doctor's life comes one more distracting patient: the sultry and elegant heiress, Madeleine Cranmere, who has moved into the Great Hall on the outskirts of Wyvern's Cross. Their passion is mutual and immediate. For her he would give up everything, divorce his wife. However, Madeleine sweetly informs him she "could never marry a divorced man." What, then, is the only alternative? Especially as haughty, all-suspecting Julia Bickleigh's nagging has become truly intolerable!

Teddy slowly makes his wife dependent upon morphine by lacing her daily breakfast grapefruit with a headache-inducer called ferolite. (Iles had a fertile brain when it came to potions; much like Agatha Christie he had a good working knowledge of the poisoner's art and loved to dabble in it creatively in his fiction.) Teddy's scheme was to make Julia's

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use of morphine known in the village, and then feed her a massive overdose. But things sometimes go awry in both love and murder.

Portraying the malicious doctor is one of the treasures of English theater, Hywel Bennett, who is not unknown in our genre. He was the young hero of the screen version of Agatha Christie's *Endless Night*, marrying heiress Hayley Mills so that he can save the tract of land known as Gypsy's Acre. He also co-starred with Mills as a driver we suspect is killing hitchhikers in *Deadly Strangers*. Recently he played the cherubic, gun-wielding agent, Ricki Tarr, in the television adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. Teddy Bickleigh is certainly a challengingly different role for the actor, but with a small bit of makeup, moustache, and wire-rimmed glasses Bennett is delightful as the henpecked, middle-aged doctor with the roving eye. "I tried to see Bickleigh as a hero, and to lend a certain amount of charm to the character." Charm he most certainly has. Bennett's most serious problem was learning to cope with an unwieldy 1920s-style hypodermic syringe. "It's more difficult than one thinks to use these things. The antique syringes are very heavy, and for an actual injection one must use a lot of force." The *New Statesman* called Bennett and Cheryl Campbell (who played the beautiful, flighty Madeleine) the best actor and actress of the television season for their performances in *Malice Aforethought*.

Close attention to period syringes is a hallmark of the show's producer, Richard Beynon, who had previously helmed the television version of *Rebecca* and the many Lord Peter Wimsey adaptations. He calls Iles' book "the first thriller in which the characters work on a psychological level of truth and not as simply puppets—which makes for interesting dramatic tensions. We *want* the doctor to get away with it." Long an admirer of the book, he was quite happy that it had not been dramatized before—"a stroke of good luck!"

The period realism of Beynon's production was enhanced by the filming of every scene in an actual English village, tranquil and seemingly unchanged by time—the cozy village of Hampshire, near Winchester. The crew was lucky enough to find a house that satisfied all requirements for the Bickleigh residence: a tennis court on the grounds, an attic, a doctor's "surgery" with a private entrance. There was even a manor house at the village outskirts for Madeleine's home. For the absorbing trial scenes that are the climax of the book, the Winchester Crown Court was used—as were the cells beneath the ancient courthouse.

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Vincent Price, in his *Mystery!* commentary, reminds us that Francis Iles/Anthony Berkeley was a member of The Detection Club, and with the other illustrious writer-members of the club collaborated on a mystery book called *The Floating Admiral*. "It's a measure of his status among his peers that he was chosen to write the final chapter—called 'Cleaning Up the Mess'!" *Malice Aforethought* demonstrates the author's inventive yet tidy brain at its sharpest: not a whodunit, for we know the murderer from paragraph one, but in this case a far more interesting what-happens!

Mystery! follows four weeks of *Malice* with return visits by the adorably crusty Horace Rumpole of Old Bailey, that rumpled, ruffled, irascible barrister who has been heard to mutter: "God's in his heaven—and with any bit of luck there's a little crime going on in the world." Happily, this season we will be treated to *six* of Rumpole's courtroom adventures; last year there were only four. That *is* heaven. For Rumpole is the most delightful character in all the annals of television law, and this year, despite the heavier caseload, the quality does not slacken.

In the first program, Rumpole tries to clear a vicar of a shoplifting charge—and feels called upon, as well, to warn the man of the cloth against the dangers of a hasty marriage. (You will recall that Rumpole shares a fretful bliss with "She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed.") His advice: "Don't do it, George. It's like pleading guilty for an indefinite sentence, without parole." In future weeks, Rumpole defends an actress accused of murder, a school teacher charged with corrupting a girl pupil, a case of mistaken identity, and a whole family of villains whose criminal activities, the barrister cheerfully admits, have paid his own son's school fees for years. There is no one quite like Rumpole, and it is good to have him back for the defense.

And it's good to have *Mystery!* back too, for its second season. With television adaptations of the works of Dick Francis and Peter Lovesey yet ahead, it's going to be a good year.

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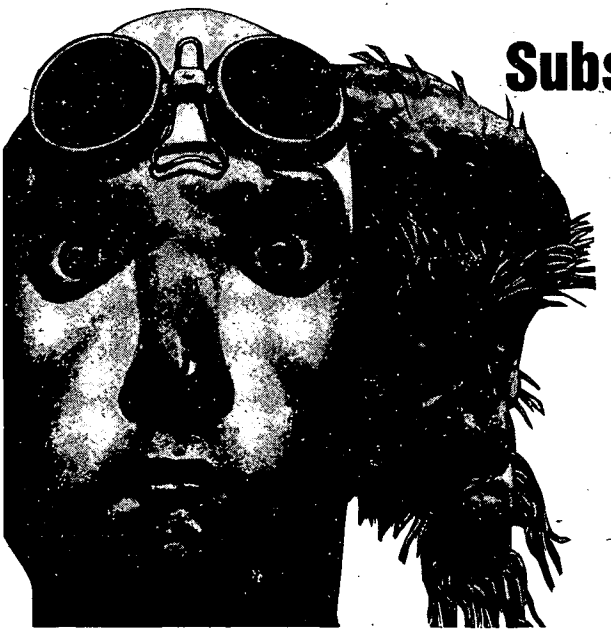

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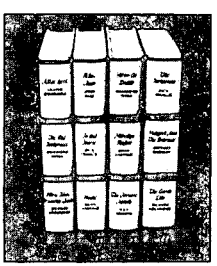

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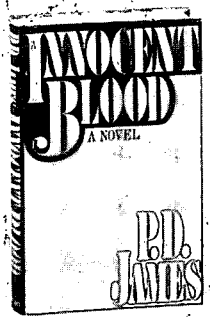

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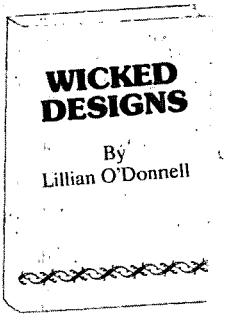

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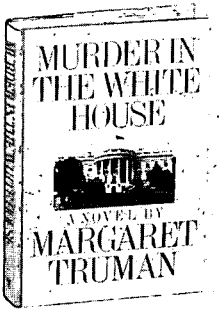

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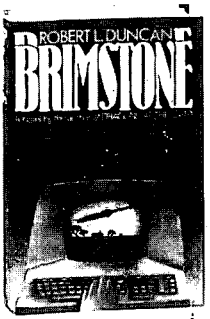

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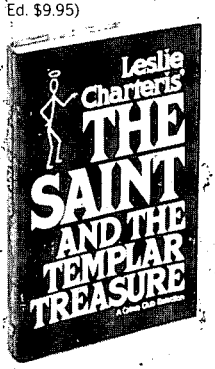

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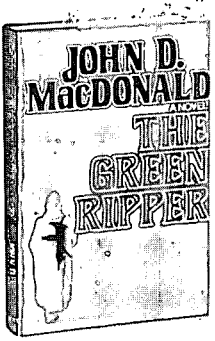

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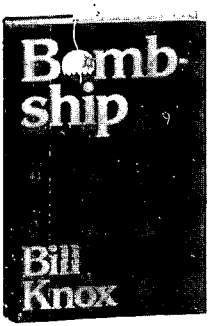

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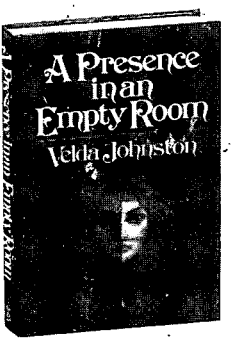

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